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Galaxy

MAGAZINE

AUGUST, 1963 • VOL. 21, NO. 6

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SPACEWAR, 1963

REMEMBER M.I.T.'s industrial design course a few years ago? It was a simple term project, designing cars, clothes, houses and so on for an export market . . . except that the export market was a little remote, being a planet of the star Arcturus, and the customers were three-legged, light-framed, non-human — and imaginary.

Well, they've done it again. This time it's M.I.T.'s computer section that is borrowing from the science-fiction magazines. We dropped in not long ago to see what was going on and had the unanticipated pleasure of fighting a full-fledged space war.

The hardware behind the game is a computer, programmed with all it needs to know about space navigation, rocket speeds, etc., so that when you operate a simple control you can send a little rocket ship across a cathode-screen readout. Swing your control to the left and the ship swerves to the left. Push the acceleration button and it zooms ahead. Put all controls neutral and it drifts.

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Want more excitement? Add another tape, and one of your controls will shoot you into hyperspace at a critical moment. Your ship disappears from the tube, and reappears, a random interval later, at a random point in space . . . It's a lovely game!

— And, no doubt, an educational one for the future computer designers who are thus learning what the darn things are capable of. But educational or not, we enjoyed it.

Somebody up there likes us!

— FREDERIK POHL

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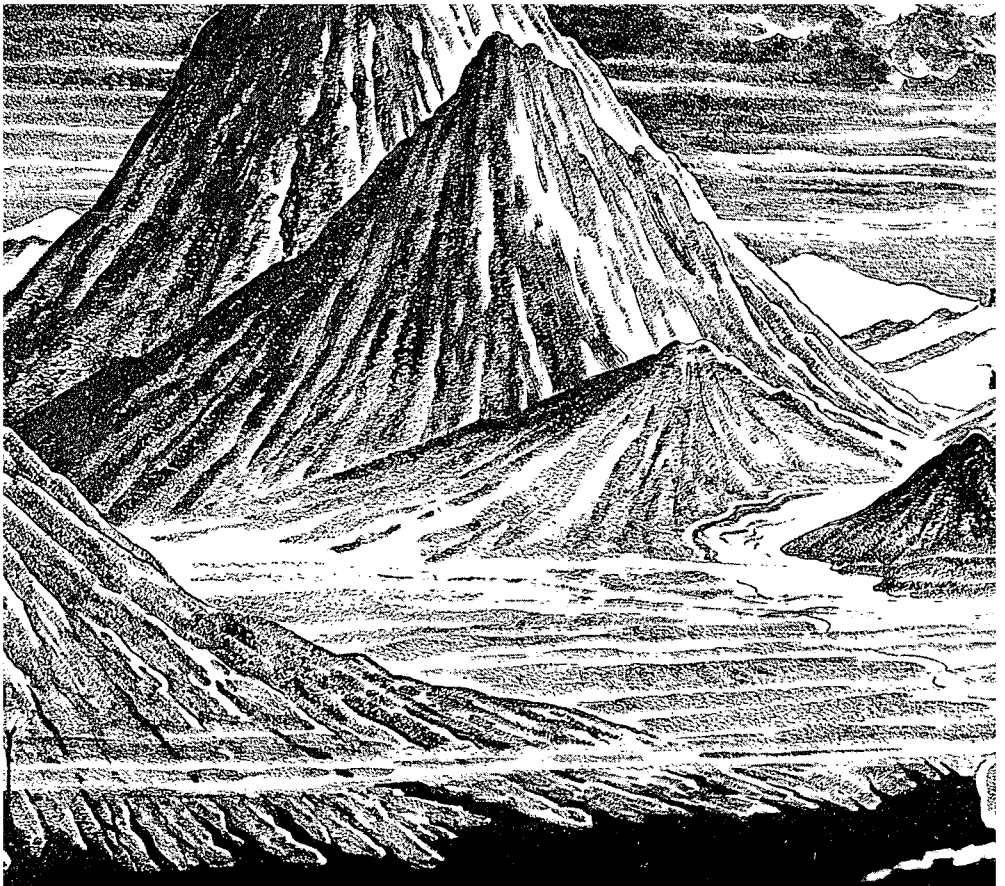

HOT PLANET

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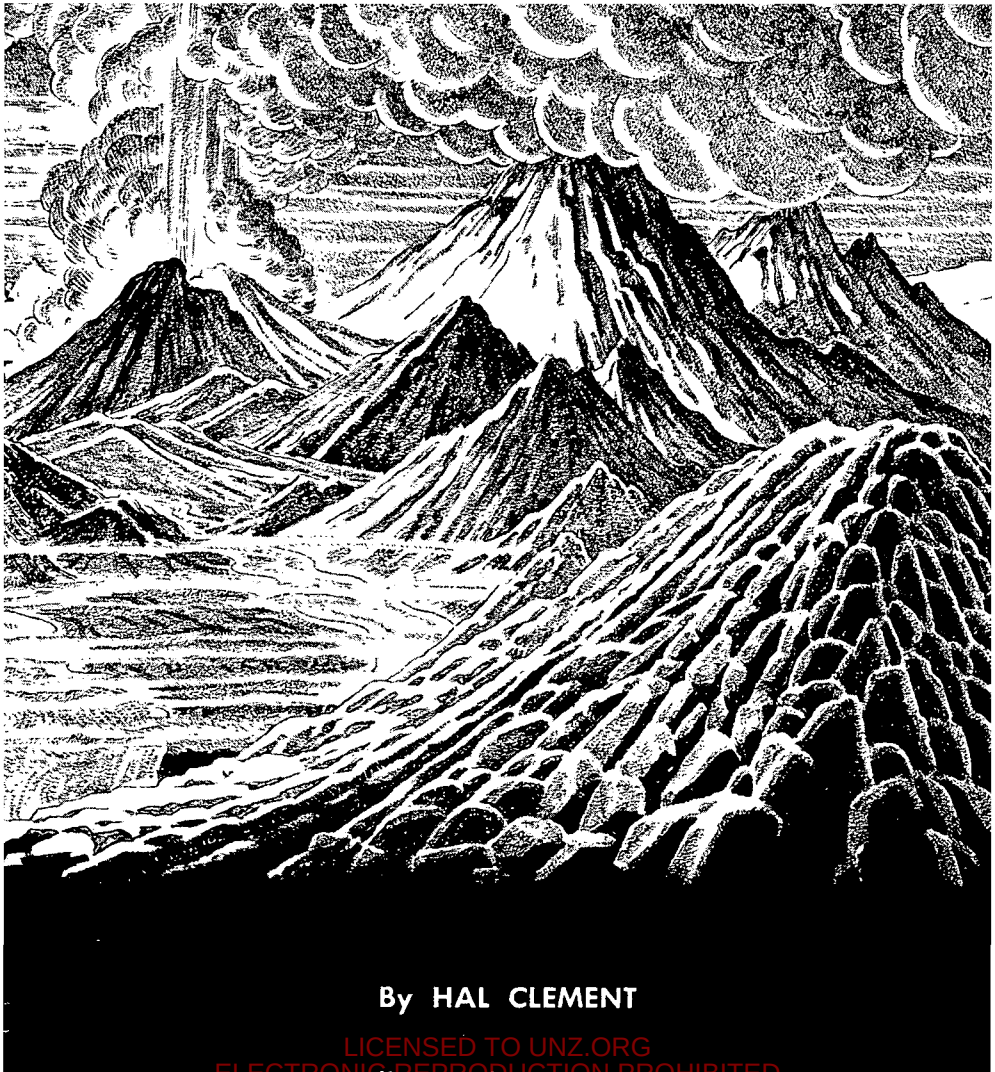

By HAL CLEMENT

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Mercury had no atmosphere — everyone knew that. Why was it developing one now?

I

THE WIND which had nearly turned the *Albireo's* landing into a disaster instead of a mathematical exercise was still playing tunes about the fins and landing legs as Schlossberg made his way down to Deck Five.

The noise didn't bother him particularly, though the endless seismic tremors made him dislike the ladders. But just now he was able to ignore both. He was curious — though not hopeful.

"Is there anything at all obvious on the last sets of tapes, Joe?"

Mardikian, the geophysicist, shrugged. "Just what you'd expect . . . on a planet which has at least one quake in each fifty-mile-square area every five minutes. You know yourself we had a nice seismic program set up, but when we touched down we found we couldn't carry it out. We've done our best with the natural tremors take all of them to make any sense out of it."

Schlossberg nodded; the words had not been necessary. His astronomical program had been one of those sabotaged by the transfer of tapes to the seismic survey.

"I just hoped," he said. "We each have an idea why Mercury developed an atmosphere during the last few decades, but I guess the high school kids on Earth will know whether it's right before we do. I'm resigned to living in a chess-type universe — few and simple rules, but infinite combinations of them. But it would be nice to know an answer sometime."

"So it would. As a matter of fact, I need to know a couple right now. From you. How close to finished are the other programs — or what's left of them?"

"I'm all set," replied Schlossberg. "I have a couple of instruments still monitoring the sun just in case, but everything in the

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teen different samples of rock and dust. I have examined in detail twelve crystal growths which looked vaguely like vegetation. Nothing was alive or contained living things by any standards I could conscientiously set."

Mardikian's gesture might have meant sympathy.

"Camille?"

"I may as well stop now as any time. I'll never be through. Tape didn't make much difference to me, but I wish I knew what weight of specimens I could take home."

"Eileen?" Mardikian's glance at the stratigrapher took the place of the actual question.

"Cam speaks for me, except that I could have used any more tape you could have spared. What I have is gone."

"All right, that leaves me, the tape-thief. The last spools are in the seismographs now, and will start running out in seventeen hours. The tractors will start out on their last rounds in sixteen, and should be back in roughly a week. Will, does that give you enough to figure the weights we rockhounds can have on the return trip?"

THE *ALBIREO'S* captain nodded. "Close enough. There really hasn't been much question since it became evident we'd find nothing for the mass tanks here. I'll have a really precise check in an hour, but I can tell right now that you have about one and a half metric tons to split up among the three of you.

"Ideal departure time is three hundred ten hours away, as you all know. We can stay here until then, or go into a parking-and-survey orbit at almost any time before then. You have all the survey you need, I should think, from the other time. But suit yourselves."

"I'd just as soon be space-sick as seasick," remarked Camille Burkett. "I still hate to think that the entire planet is as shivery as the spot we picked."

Willard Rowson smiled. "You researchers told me where to land after ten days in orbit mapping this rockball. I set you just where you asked. If you'd found even five tons of juice we could use in the reaction tanks I could still take you to another one — if you could agree which one. I hate to say 'Don't blame me,' but I can't think of anything else that fits."

"So we sit until the last of the tractors is back with the precious seismo tapes, playing battleship while our back teeth are being shaken out by earthquakes — excuse the word. What a thrill! Glorious adventure!" Zaino, the communications specialist who had been out of a job almost constantly since the landing, spoke

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sourly. The captain was the only one who saw fit to answer.

"If you want adventure, you made a mistake exploring space. The only space adventures I've heard of are second-hand stories built on guesswork; the people who really had them weren't around to tell about it. Unless Dr. Marini discovers a set of Mercurian monsters at the last minute and they invade the ship or cut off one of the tractors, I'm afraid you'll have to do without adventures." Zaino grimaced.

"That sounds funny coming from a spaceman, Captain. I didn't really mean adventure, though; all I want is something to do besides betting whether the next quake will come in one minute or five. I haven't even had to fix a suit-radio since we touched down. How about my going out with one of the tractors on this last trip, at least?"

"It's all right with me," replied Rowson, "but Dr. Mardikian runs the professional part of this operation. I require that Spurr, Trackman, Hargedon and Aiello go as drivers, since without them even a minor mechanical problem would be more than an adventure. As I recall it, Dr. Harmon, Dr. Schlossberg, Dr. Marini and Dr. Mardikian are scheduled to go; but if any one of them is willing to let you take his or her place, I certainly don't mind."

The radioman looked around hopefully. The geologists and the biologist shook their heads negatively, firmly and unanimously; but the astronomer pondered for a moment. Zaino watched tensely.

"It may be all right," Schlossberg said at last. "What I want to get is a set of wind, gas pressure, gas temperature and gas composition measures around the route. I didn't expect to be more meteorologist than astronomer when we left Earth, and didn't have exactly the right equipment. Hargedon and Aiello helped me improvise some, and this is the first chance to use it on Darkside. If you can learn what has to be done with it before starting time, though, you are welcome to my place."

THE COMMUNICATOR got to his feet fast enough to leave the deck in Mercury's feeble gravity.

"Lead me to it, Doc. I guess I can learn to read a home-made weathervane!"

"Is that merely bragging, or a challenge?" drawled a voice which had not previously joined the discussion. Zaino flushed a bit.

"Sorry, Luigi," he said hastily. "I didn't mean it just that way. But I still think I can run the stuff."

"Likely enough," Aiello replied.

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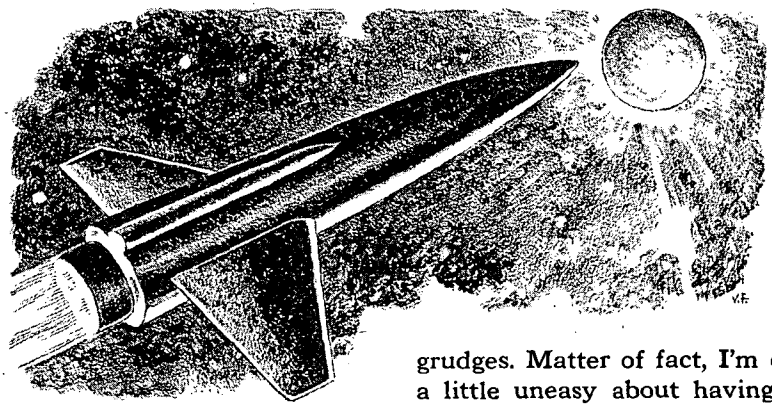

"Remember though, it wasn't made just for talking into." Schlossberg, now on his feet, cut in quickly.

"Come on, Arnie. We'll have to suit up to see the equipment; it's outside."

He shepherded the radioman to the hatch at one side of the deck and shooed him down toward the engine and air lock levels. Both were silent for some moments; but safely out of earshot of Deck Five the younger man looked up and spoke.

"You needn't push, Doc. I wasn't going to make anything of it. Luigi was right, and I asked for it." The astronomer slowed a bit in his descent.

"I wasn't really worried," he replied, "but we have several months yet before we can get away from each other, and I don't like talk that could set up grudges. Matter of fact, I'm even a little uneasy about having the girls along, though I'm no misogynist."

"Girls? They're not — "

"There goes your foot again. Even Harmon is about ten years older than you, I suppose. But they're girls to me. What's more important, they no doubt think of themselves as girls."

"Even Dr. Burkett? That is — I mean — "

"Even Dr. Burkett. Here, get into your suit. And maybe you'd better take out the mike. It'll be enough if you can listen for the next hour or two." Zaino made no answer, suspecting with some justice that anything he said would be wrong.

Each made final checks on the other's suit; then they descended one more level to the airlock. This occupied part of the same deck as the fusion plants, below the wings and reaction mass tanks but above the main engine. Its

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outer door was just barely big enough to admit a spacesuited person. Even with the low air pressure carried by spaceships, a large door area meant large total force on jamb, hinges and locks. It opened onto a small balcony from which a ladder led to the ground. The two men paused on the balcony to look over the landscape.

This hadn't changed noticeably since the last time either had been out, though there might have been some small difference in the volcanic cones a couple of miles away to the northeast. The furrows down the sides of these, which looked as though they had been cut by water but were actually bone-dry ash slides, were always undergoing alteration as gas from below kept blowing fresh scoria fragments out of the craters.

THE SPINES — steep, jagged fragments of rock which thrust upward from the plain beyond and to both sides of the cones — seemed dead as ever.

The level surface between the *Albireo* and the cones was more interesting. Mardikian and Schlossberg believed it to be a lava sheet dating from early in Mercury's history, when more volatile substances still existed in the surface rocks to cut down their viscosity when molten. They supposed that much — perhaps most — of the surface around the "twilight" belt had been flooded by this very liquid lava, which had cooled to a smoother surface than most Earthly lava flows.

How long it had stayed cool they didn't guess. But both men felt sure that Mercury must have periodic upheavals as heat accumulated inside it — heat coming not from radioactivity but from tidal energy. Mercury's orbit is highly eccentric. At perihelion, tidal force tries to pull it apart along the planet-to-sun line, while at aphelion the tidal force is less and the little world's own gravity tries to bring it back to a spherical shape. The real change in form is not great, but a large force working through even a small amount of distance can mean a good deal of energy.

If the energy can't leak out — and Mercury's rocks conduct heat no better than those of Earth — the temperature must rise.

Sooner or later, the men argued, deeply buried rock must fuse to magma. Its liquefaction would let the bulk of the planet give farther under tidal stress, so heat would be generated even faster. Eventually a girdle of magma would have to form far below the crust all around the twilight strip, where the tidal strain would be greatest. Sooner or later

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this would melt its way to the surface, giving the zone a period of intense volcanic activity and, incidentally, giving the planet a temporary atmosphere.

The idea was reasonable. It had, the astronomer admitted, been suggested long before to account for supposed vulcanism on the moon. It justified the careful examination that Schlossberg and Zaino gave the plain before they descended the ladder; for it made reasonable the occasional changes which were observed to occur in the pattern of cracks weaving over its surface.

No one was certain just how permanent the local surface was — though no one could really justify feeling safer on board the *Albireo* than outside on the lava. If anything really drastic happened, the ship would be no protection.

The sun, hanging just above the horizon slightly to the watcher's right, cast long shadows which made the cracks stand out clearly; as far as either man could see, nothing had changed recently. They descended the ladder carefully — even the best designed spacesuits are somewhat vulnerable — and made their way to the spot where the tractors were parked.

A sheet-metal fence a dozen feet high and four times as long provided shade, which was more than a luxury this close to the sun. The tractors were parked in this shadow, and beside and between them were piles of equipment and specimens. The apparatus Schlossberg had devised was beside the tractor at the north end of the line, just inside the shaded area.

It was still just inside the shade when they finished, four hours later. Hargedon had joined them during the final hour and helped pack the equipment in the tractor he was to drive. Zaino had had no trouble in learning to make the observations Schlossberg wanted, and the youngster was almost unbearably cocky. Schlossberg hoped, as they returned to the *Albireo,* that no one would murder the communications expert in the next twelve hours. There would be nothing to worry about after the trip started; Hargedon was quite able to keep anyone in his place without being nasty about it. If Zaino had been going with Aiello or Harmon — but he wasn't, and it was pointless to dream up trouble.

And no trouble developed all by itself.

II

ZAINO WAS not only still alive but still reasonably popular when the first of the tractors set out, carrying Eileen Harmon and

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Eric Trackman, the *Albireo's* nuclear engineer.

It started more than an hour before the others, since the stratigrapher's drilling program, "done" or not, took extra time. The tractor hummed off to the south, since both Darkside routes required a long detour to pass the chasm to the west. Routes had been worked out from the stereophotos taken during the orbital survey. Even Darkside had been covered fairly well with Uniquantum film under Venus light.

The Harmon-Trackman vehicle was well out of sight when Mardikian and Aiello started out on one of the Brightside routes, and a few minutes later Marini set out on the other with the spacesuit technician, Mary Spurr, driving.

Both vehicles disappeared quickly into a valley to the northeast, between the ash cones and a thousand-foot spine which rose just south of them. All the tractors were in good radio contact; Zaino made sure of that before he abandoned the radio watch to Rowson, suited up and joined Hargedon at the remaining one. They climbed in, and Hargedon set it in motion.

At about the same time, the first tractor came into view again, now traveling north on the farther side of the chasm. Hargedon took this as evidence that the route thus far was unchanged, and kicked in highest speed.

The cabin was pretty cramped, even though some of the equipment had been attached outside. The men could not expect much comfort for the next week.

Hargedon was used to the trips, however. He disapproved on principle of people who complained about minor inconveniences such as having to sleep in spacesuits; fortunately, Zaino's interest and excitement overrode any thought he might have had about discomfort.

This lasted through the time they spent doubling the vast crack in Mercury's crust, driving on a little to the north of the ship on the other side and then turning west toward the dark hemisphere. The route was identical to that of Harmon's machine for some time, though no trace of its passage showed on the hard surface. Then Hargedon angled off toward the southwest. He had driven this run often enough to know it well even without the markers which had been set out with the seismographs. The photographic maps were also aboard. With them, even Zaino had no trouble keeping track of their progress while they remained in sunlight.

However, the sun sank as they traveled west. In two hours its lower rim would have been on the horizon, had they been able to

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see the horizon; as it was, more of the "sea level" lava plain was in shadow than not even near the ship, and their route now lay in semi-darkness.

The light came from peaks projecting into the sunlight, from scattered sky-light which was growing rapidly fainter and from the brighter celestial objects such as Earth. Even with the tractor's lights it was getting harder to spot crevasses and seismometer markers. Zaino quickly found the fun wearing off . . . though his pride made him cover this fact as best he could.

If Hargedon saw this, he said nothing. He set Zaino to picking up every other instrument, as any partner would have, making no allowance for the work the youngster was doing for Schlossberg. This might, of course, have had the purpose of keeping the radioman too busy to think about discomfort. Or it might merely have been Hargedon's idea of normal procedure.

Whatever the cause, Zaino got little chance to use the radio once they had driven into the darkness. He managed only one or two brief talks with those left at the ship.

THE TALKS might have helped his morale, since they certainly must have given the impression that nothing was going on in the ship while at least he had something to do in the tractor. However, this state of affairs did not last. Before the vehicle was four hours out of sight of the *Albireo*, a broadcast by Camille Burkett reached them.

The mineralogist's voice contained at least as much professional enthusiasm as alarm, but everyone listening must have thought promptly of the dubious stability of Mercury's crust. The call was intended for her fellow geologists Mardikian and Harmon. But it interested Zaino at least as much.

"Joe! Eileen! There's a column of what looks like black smoke rising over Northeast Spur. It can't be a real fire, of course; I can't see its point of origin, but if it's the convection current it seems to be the source must be pretty hot. It's the closest thing to a genuine volcano I've seen since we arrived; it's certainly not another of those ash mounds. I should think you'd still be close enough to make it out, Joe. Can you see anything?"

The reply from Mardikian's tractor was inaudible to Zaino and Hargedon, but Burkett's answer made its general tenor plain.

"I hadn't thought of that. Yes, I'd say it was pretty close to the Brightside route. It wouldn't be practical for you to stop your run now to come back to see. You couldn't do much about it any-

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way. I could go out to have a look and then report to you. If the way back is blocked there'll be plenty of time to work out another." Hargedon and Zaino passed questioning glances at each other during the shorter pause that followed.

"I know there aren't," the voice then went on, responding to the words they could not hear, "but it's only two or three miles, I'd say. Two to the spur and not much farther to where I could see the other side. Enough of the way is in shade so I could make it in a suit easily enough. I can't see calling back either of the dark-side tractors. Their work is just as important as the rest — anyway, Eileen is probably out of range. She hasn't answered yet."

Another pause.

"That's true. Still, it would mean sacrificing that set of seismic records — no, wait. We could go out later for those. And Mel could take his own weather measures on the later trip. There's plenty of time!"

Pause, longer this time.

"You're right, of course. I just wanted to get an early look at this volcano, if it is one. We'll let the others finish their runs, and when you get back you can check the thing from the other side yourself. If it is blocking your way there's time to find an alternate route. We could be doing that from the maps in the meantime, just in case."

Zaino looked again at his companion.

"Isn't that just my luck!" he exclaimed. "I jump at the first chance to get away from being bored to death. The minute I'm safely away, the only interesting thing of the whole operation happens — back at the ship!"

"Who asked to come on this trip?"

"Oh, I'm not blaming anyone but myself. If I'd stayed back there the volcano would have popped out here somewhere, or else waited until we were gone."

"If it is a volcano. Dr. Burkett didn't seem quite sure."

"No, and I'll bet a nickel she's suiting up right now to go out and see. I hope she comes back with something while we're still near enough to hear about it."

Hargedon shrugged. "I suppose it was also just your luck that sent you on a Darkside trip? You know the radio stuff. You knew we couldn't reach as far this way with the radios. Didn't you think of that in advance?"

"I didn't think of it, any more than you would have. It was bad luck, but I'm not grousing about it. Let's get on with this job." Hargedon nodded with approval, and possibly with some surprise, and the tractor hummed on its way.

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The darkness deepened around the patches of lava shown by the driving lights; the sky darkened toward a midnight hue, with stars showing ever brighter through it; and radio reception from the *Albireo* began to get spotty. Gas density at the ion layer was high enough so that recombination of molecules with their radiation-freed electrons was rapid. Only occasional streamers of ionized gas reached far over Darkside. As these thinned out, so did radio reception. Camille Burkett's next broadcast came through very poorly.

There was enough in it, however, to seize the attention of the two men in the tractor.

SHE WAS saying: "— real all right, and dangerous. It's the . . . thing I ever saw . . . kinds of lava from what looks like . . . same vent. There's high viscosity stuff building a spatter cone to end all spatter cones, and some very thin fluid from somewhere at the bottom. The flow has already blocked the valley used by the Brightside routes and is coming along it. A new return route will have to be found for the tractors that . . . was spreading fast when I saw it. I can't tell how much will come. But unless it stops there's nothing at all to keep the flow away from the ship. It isn't coming fast, but it's coming. I'd advise all tractors to turn back. Captain Rowson reminds me that only one takeoff is possible. If we leave this site, we're committed to leaving Mercury. Arnie and Ren, do you hear me?"

Zaino responded at once. "We got most of it, Doctor. Do you really think the ship is in danger?"

"I don't know. I can only say that *if* this flow continues the ship will have to leave, because this area will sooner or later be covered. I can't guess how likely . . . check further to get some sort of estimate. It's different from any Earthly lava source — maybe you heard — should try to get Eileen and Eric back, too. I can't raise them. I suppose they're well out from under the ion layer by now. Maybe you're close enough to them to catch them with diffracted waves. Try, anyway. Whether you can raise them or not you'd better start back yourself."

Hargedon cut in at this point. "What does Dr. Mardikian say about that? We still have most of the seismometers on this route to visit."

"I think Captain Rowson has the deciding word here, but if it helps your decision Dr. Mardikian has already started back. He hasn't finished his route, either. So hop back here, Ren. And Arnie, put that technical skill you

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haven't had to use yet to work raising Eileen and Eric."

"What I can do, I will," replied Zaino, "but you'd better tape a recall message and keep it going out on. Let's see — band F."

"All right. I'll be ready to check the volcano as soon as you get back. How long?"

"Seven hours — maybe six and a half," replied Hargedon. "We have to be careful."

"Very well. Stay outside when you arrive; I'll want to go right out in the tractor to get a closer look." She cut off.

"And *that* came through clearly enough!" remarked Hargedon as he swung the tractor around. "I've been awake for fourteen hours, driving off and on for ten of them; I'm about to drive for another six; and then I'm to stand by for more."

"Would you like me to do some of the driving?" asked Zaino.

"I guess you'll have to, whether I like it or not," was the rather lukewarm reply. "I'll keep on for awhile, though — until we're back in better light. You get at your radio job."

III

ZAINO TRIED. Hour after hour he juggled from one band to another. Once he had Hargedon stop while he went out to attach a makeshift antenna

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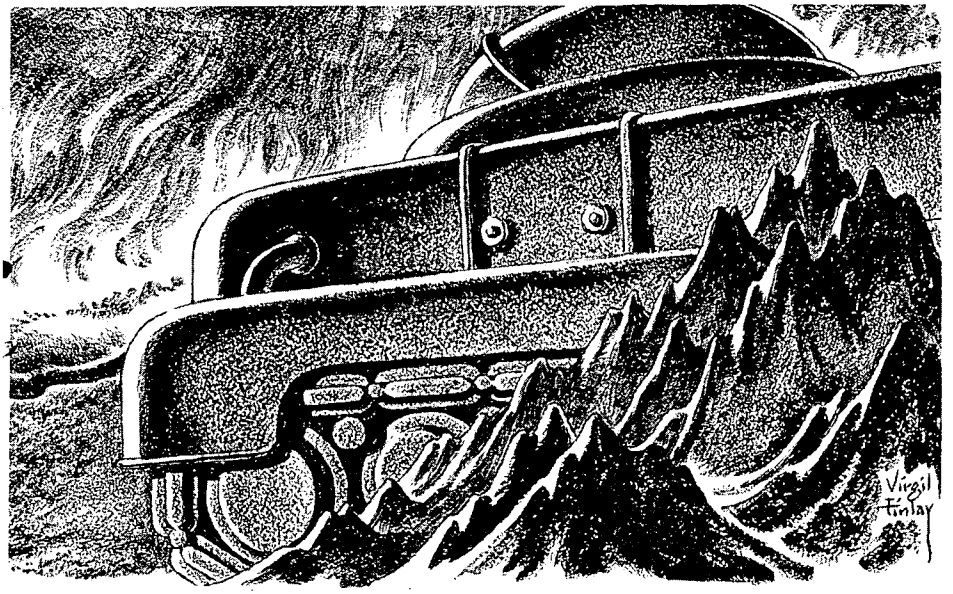

which, he hoped, would change his output from broadcast to some sort of beam; after this he kept probing the sky with the "beam," first listening to the *Albireo's* broadcast in an effort to find projecting wisps of ionosphere and then, whenever he thought he had one, switching on his transmitter and driving his own message at it.

Not once did he complain about lack of equipment or remark how much better he could do once he was back at the ship.

Hargedon's silence began to carry an undercurrent of approval not usual in people who spent much time with Zaino. The technician made no further reference to the suggestion of switching drivers. They came in sight of the *Albireo* and doubled the chasm with Hargedon still at the wheel, Zaino still at his radio and both of them still uncertain whether any of the calls had gotten through.

Both had to admit, even before they could see the ship, that Burkett had had a right to be impressed.

The smoke column showed starkly against the sky, blowing back over the tractor and blocking the sunlight which would otherwise have glared into the driver's eyes. Fine particles fell from it in a steady shower; looking back, the men could see tracks

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left by their vehicle in the deposit which had already fallen.

As they approached the ship the dark pillar grew denser and narrower, while the particles raining from it became coarser. In some places the ash was drifting into fairly deep piles, giving Hargedon some anxiety about possible concealed cracks. The last part of the trip, along the edge of the great chasm and around its end, was really dangerous; cracks running from its sides were definitely spreading. The two men reached the *Albireo* later than Hargedon had promised, and found Burkett waiting impatiently with a pile of apparatus beside her.

She didn't wait for them to get out before starting to organize.

"There isn't much here. We'll take off just enough of what you're carrying to make room for this. No — wait. I'll have to check some of your equipment; I'm going to need one of Milt Schlossberg's gadget's, I think, so leave that on. We'll take — "

"Excuse me, Doctor," cut in Hargedon. "Our suits need servicing, or at least mine will if you want me to drive you. Perhaps Arnie can help you load for a while, if you don't think it's too important for him to get at the radio — "

"Of course. Excuse me. I should have had someone out here to help me with this. You two go on in. Ren, please get back as soon as you can. I can do the work here; none of this stuff is very heavy."

Zaino hesitated as he swung out of the cab. True, there wasn't too much to be moved, and it wasn't very heavy in Mercury's gravity, and he really should be at the radio; but the thirty-nine-year-old mineralogist was a middle-aged lady by his standards, and shouldn't be allowed to carry heavy packages . . .

"Get along, Arnie!" the middle-aged lady interrupted this train of thought. "Eric and Eileen are getting farther away and harder to reach every second you dawdle!"

HE GOT, though he couldn't help looking northeast as he went rather than where he was going.

The towering menace in that direction would have claimed anyone's attention. The pillar of sable ash was rising straighter, as though the wind were having less effect on it. An equally black cone had risen into sight beyond Northeast Spur — a cone that must have grown to some two thousand feet in roughly ten hours. It had far steeper sides than the cinder mounds near it; it couldn't be made of the same loose ash. Perhaps it consisted of

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half-melted particles which were fusing together as they fell — that might be what Burkett had meant by "spatter-cone." Still, if that were the case, the material fountaining from the cone's top should be lighting the plain with its incandescence rather than casting an inky shadow for its entire height.

Well, that was a problem for the geologists; Zaino climbed aboard and settled to his task.

The trouble was that he could do very little more here than he could in the tractor. He could have improvised longer-wave transmitting coils whose radiations would have diffracted a little more effectively beyond the horizon, but the receiver on the missing vehicle would not have detected them. He had more power at his disposal, but could only beam it into empty space with his better antennae. He had better equipment for locating any projecting wisps of charged gas which might reflect his waves, but he was already located under a solid roof of the stuff — the *Albireo* was technically on Brightside. Bouncing his beam from this layer still didn't give him the range he needed, as he had found both by calculation and trial.

What he really needed was a relay satellite. The target was simply too far around Mercury's sharp curve by now for anything less.

Zaino's final gesture was to set his transmission beam on the lowest frequency the tractor would pick up, aim it as close to the vehicle's direction as he could calculate from map and itinerary and set the recorded return message going. He told Rowson as much.

"Can't think of anything else?" the captain asked. "Well, neither can I, but of course it's not my field. I'd give a year's pay if I could. How long before they should be back in range?"

"About four days. A hundred hours, give or take a few. They'll be heading back anyway by that time."

"Of course. Well, keep trying."

"I am — or rather, the equipment is. I don't see what else I can do unless a really bright idea should suddenly sprout. Is there anywhere else I could be useful? I'm as likely to have ideas working as just sitting."

"We can keep you busy, all right. But how about taking a transmitter up one of those mountains? That would get your wave farther."

"Not as far as it's going already. I'm bouncing it off the ion layer, which is higher than any mountain we've seen on Mercury even if it's nowhere near as high as Earth's."

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"Hmph. All right."

"I could help Ren and Dr. Burkett. I could hang on outside the tractor — "

"They've already gone. You'd better call them, though, and keep a log of what they do."

"All right." Zaino turned back to his board and with no trouble raised the tractor carrying Hargedon and the mineralogist. The latter had been trying to call the *Albireo* and had some acid comments about radio operators who slept on the job.

"THERE'S ONLY one of me, and I've been trying to get the Darkside team," he pointed out. "Have you found anything new about this lava flood?"

"Flow, not flood," corrected the professional automatically. "We're not in sight of it yet. We've just rounded the corner that takes us out of your sight. It's over a mile yet, and a couple of more corners, before we get to the spot where I left it. Of course, it will be closer than that by now. It was spreading at perhaps a hundred yards an hour then. That's one figure we must refine . . . Of course, I'll try to get samples, too. I wish there were some way to get samples of the central cone. The whole thing is the queerest volcano I've ever heard of. Have you gotten Eileen started back?"

"Not as far as I can tell. As with your cone samples, there are practical difficulties," replied Zaino. "I haven't quit yet, though."

"I should think not. If some of us were paid by the idea we'd be pretty poor, but the perspiration part of genius is open to all of us."

"You mean I should charge a bonus for getting this call through?" retorted the operator.

Whatever Burkett's reply to this might have been was never learned; her attention was diverted at that point.

"We've just come in sight of the flow. It's about five hundred yards ahead. We'll get as close as seems safe, and I'll try to make sure whether it's really lava or just mud."

"Mud? Is that possible? I thought there wasn't — couldn't be — any water on this planet!"

"It is, and there probably isn't. The liquid phase of mud doesn't have to be water, even though it usually is on Earth. Here, for example, it might conceivably be sulfur."

"But if it's just mud, it wouldn't hurt the ship, would it?"

"Probably not."

"Then why all this fuss about getting the tractors back in a hurry?"

THE VOICE which answered reminded him of another lady in his past, who had kept him

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after school for drawing pictures in math class.

"Because in my judgment the flow is far more likely to be lava than mud, and if I must be wrong I'd rather my error were one that left us alive. I have no time at the moment to explain the basis of my judgment. I will be reporting our activities quite steadily from now on, and would prefer that you not interrupt unless a serious emergency demands it, or you get a call from Eileen.

"We are about three hundred yards away now. The front is moving about as fast as before, which suggests that the flow is coming only along this valley. It's only three or four feet high, so viscosity is very low or density very high. Probably the former, considering where we are. It's as black as the smoke column."

"Not glowing?" cut in Zaino thoughtlessly.

"*Black,* I said. Temperature will be easier to measure when we get closer. The front is nearly straight across the valley, with just a few lobes projecting ten or twelve yards and one notch where a small spine is being surrounded. By the way, I trust you're taping all this?" Again Zaino was reminded of the afternoon after school.

"Yes, Ma'am," he replied. "On my one and only monitor tape."

"Very well. We're stopping near the middle of the valley one hundreds yards from the front. I am getting out, and will walk as close as I can with a sampler and a radiometer. I assume that the radio equipment will continue to relay my suit broadcast back to you." Zaino cringed a little, certain as he was that the tractor's electronic apparatus was in perfect order.

It struck him that Dr. Burkett was being more snappish than usual. It never crossed his mind that the woman might be afraid.

"Ren, don't get any closer with the tractor unless I call. I'll get a set of temperature readings as soon as I'm close enough. Then I'll try to get a sample. Then I'll come back with that to the tractor, leave it and the radiometer and get the markers to set out."

"Couldn't I be putting out the markers while you get the sample, Doctor?"

"You could, but I'd rather you stayed at the wheel." Hargedon made no answer, and Burkett resumed her description for the record.

"I'm walking toward the front, a good deal faster than it's flowing toward me. I am now about twenty yards away, and am going to take a set of radiation-temperature measures." A brief pause. "Readings coming. Nine sixty. Nine eighty. Nine ninety — that's from the bottom edge near the

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spine that's being surrounded. Nine eighty-five —" The voice droned on until about two dozen readings had been taped. Then, "I'm going closer now. The sampler is just a ladle on a twelve-foot handle we improvised, so I'll have to get that close. The stuff is moving slowly; there should be no trouble. I'm in reach now. The lava is very liquid; there's no trouble getting the sampler in — or out again — it's not very dense, either. I'm heading back toward the tractor now. No, Ren, don't come to meet me."

There was a minute of silence, while Zaino pictured the space-suited figure with its awkwardly long burden, walking away from the creeping menace to the relative safety of the tractor. "It's frozen solid already; we needn't worry about spilling. The temperature is about — five eighty. Give me the markers, please."

Another pause, shorter this time. Zaino wondered how much of that could be laid to a faster walk without the ladle and how much to the lessening distance between flow and tractor. "I'm tossing the first marker close to the edge — it's landed less than a foot from the lava. They're all on a light cord at ten-foot intervals; I'm paying out the cord as I go back to the tractor. Now we'll stand by and time the arrival at each marker as well as we can."

"How close are you to the main cone?" asked Zaino.

"Not close enough to see its base, I'm afraid. Or to get a sample of it, which is worse. We — goodness, what was that?"

Zaino had just time to ask, "What was what?" when he found out.

IV

FOR A moment, he thought that the *Albireo* had been flung bodily into the air. Then he decided that the great metal pillar had merely fallen over. Finally he realized that the ship was still erect, but the ground under it had just tried to leave.

Everyone in the group had become so used to the almost perpetual ground tremors that they had ceased to notice them; but this one demanded attention. Rowson, using language which suggested that his career might not have been completely free of adventure after all, flashed through the communication level on his way down to the power section. Schlossberg and Babineau followed, the medic pausing to ask Zaino if he were all right. The radioman merely nodded affirmatively; his attention was already back at his job. Burkett was speaking a good deal faster than before.

"Never mind if the sample isn't

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lashed tight yet — if it falls off there'll be plenty more. There isn't time! Arnie, get in touch with Dr. Mardikian and Dr. Marini. Tell them that this volcano is explosive, that all estimates of what the flow may do are off until we can make more measures, and in any case the whole situation is unpredictable. Everyone should get back as soon as possible. Remember, we decided that those big craters Eileen checked were not meteor pits. I don't know whether this thing will let go in the next hour, the next year, or at all. Maybe what's happening now will act as a safety valve — but let's get out. Ren, that flow is speeding up and getting higher, and the ash rain is getting a lot worse. Can you see to drive?"

She fell silent. Zaino, in spite of her orders, left his set long enough to leap to the nearest port for a look at the volcano.

He never regretted it.

Across the riven plain, whose cracks were now nearly hidden under the new ash, the black cone towered above the nearer elevations. It was visibly taller than it had been only a few hours before. The fountain from its top was thicker, now jetting straight up as though wind no longer meant a thing to the fiercely driven column of gas and dust. The darkness was not so complete; patches of red and yellow incandescence showed briefly in the pillar, and glowing sparks rather than black cinders rained back on the steep slopes. Far above, a ring of smoke rolled and spread about the column, forming an ever-broadening blanket of opaque cloud above a landscape which had never before been shaded from the sun. Streamers of lightning leaped between cloud and pillar, pillar and mountain, even cloud and ground. Any thunder there might have been was drowned in the howl of the escaping gas, a roar which seemed to combine every possible note from the shrillest possible whistle to a bass felt by the chest rather than heard by the ears. Rowson's language had become inaudible almost before he had disappeared down the hatch.

For long moments the radioman watched the spreading cloud, and wondered whether the *Albireo* could escape being struck by the flickering, ceaseless lightning. Far above the widening ring of cloud the smoke fountain drove, spreading slowly in the thinning atmosphere and beyond it. Zaino had had enough space experience to tell at a glance whether a smoke or dust cloud was in air or not. This wasn't, at least at the upper extremity . . .

And then, quite calmly, he turned back to his desk, aimed

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the antenna straight up, and called Eileen Harmon. She answered promptly.

THE STRATIGRAPHER listened without interruption to his report and the order to return. She conferred briefly with her companion, replied "We'll be back in twelve hours," and signed off. And that was that.

Zaino settled back with a sign, and wondered whether it would be tactful to remind Rowson of his offer of a year's pay.

All four vehicles were now homeward bound; all one had to worry about was whether any of them would make it. Hargedon and Burkett were fighting their way through an ever-increasing ash rain a scant two miles away—ash which not only cut visibility but threatened to block the way with drifts too deep to negotiate. The wind, now blowing fiercely toward the volcano, blasted the gritty stuff against their front window as though it would erode through; and the lava flow, moving far faster than the gentle ooze they had never quite measured, surged — and glowed — grimly behind.

A hundred miles or more to the east, the tractors containing Mardikian, Marini and their drivers headed southwest along the alternate route their maps had suggested; but Mardikian, some three hours in the lead, reported that he could see four other smoke columns in that general direction.

Mercury seemed to be entering a new phase. The maps might well be out of date.

Harmon and Trackman were having no trouble at the moment, but they would have to pass the great chasm. This had been shooting out daughter cracks when Zaino and Hargedon passed it hours before. No one could say what it might be like now, and no one was going out to make sure.

"We can see you!" Burkett's voice came through suddenly. "Half a mile to go, and we're way ahead of the flow."

"But it's coming?" Rowson asked tensely. He had returned from the power level at Zaino's phoned report of success.

"It's coming."

"How fast? When will it get here? Do you know whether the ship can stand contact with it?"

"I don't know the speed exactly. There may be two hours, maybe five or six. The ship can't take it. Even the temperature measures I got were above the softening point of the alloys, and it's hotter and much deeper now. Anyway, if the others aren't back before the flow reaches the ship they won't get through. The tractor wheels would char away, and I doubt that the bodies would float.

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You certainly can't wade through the stuff in a spacesuit, either."

"And you think there can't be more than five or six hours before the flow arrives?"

"I'd say that was a very optimistic guess. I'll stop and get a better speed estimate if you want, but won't swear to it."

Rowson thought for a moment.

"No," he said finally, "don't bother. Get back here as soon as you can. We need the tractor and human muscles more than we need even expert guesses." He turned to the operator.

"Zaino, tell all the tractors there'll be no answer from the ship for a while, because no one will be aboard. Then suit up and come outside." He was gone.

TEN MINUTES later, six human beings and a tractor were assembled in the flame-lit near-darkness outside the ship. The cloud had spread to the horizon, and the sun was gone. Burkett and Hargedon had arrived, but Rowson wasted no time on congratulations.

"We have work to do. It will be easy enough to keep the lava from the ship, since there seems to be a foot or more of ash on the ground and a touch of main drive would push it into a ringwall around us; but that's not the main problem. We have to keep it from reaching the chasm anywhere south of us, since that's the way the others will be coming. If they're cut off, they're dead. It will be brute work. We'll use the tractor any way we can think of. Unfortunately it has no plow attachment, and I can't think of anything aboard which could be turned into one. You have shovels, such as they are. The ash is light, especially here, but there's a mile and a half of dam to be built. I don't see how it can possibly be done . . . but it's going to be."

"Come on, Arnie! You're young and strong," came the voice of the mineralogist. "You should be able to lift as much of this stuff as I can. I understand you were lucky enough to get hold of Eileen — have you asked for the bonus yet? — but your work isn't done."

"It wasn't luck," Zaino retorted. Burkett, in spite of her voice, seened much less of a schoolmistress when encased in a spacesuit and carrying a shovel, so he was able to talk back to her. "I was simply alert enough to make use of existing conditions, which I had to observe for myself in spite of all the scientists around. I'm charging the achievement to my regular salary. I saw —"

He stopped suddenly, both with with tongue and shovel. Then, "Captain!"

"What is it?"

"The only reason we're starting

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this wall here is to keep well ahead of the flow so we can work as long as possible, isn't it?"

"Yes, I suppose so. I never thought of trying anywhere else. The valley would mean a much shorter dam, but if the flow isn't through it by now it would be before we could get there — oh! Wait a minute!"

"Yes, sir. You can put the main switch anywhere in a D. C. circuit. Where are the seismology stores we never had to use?"

Four minutes later the tractor set out from the *Albireo,* carrying Rowson and Zaino. Six minutes after that it stopped at the base of the ash cone which formed the north side of the valley from which the lava was coming. They parked a quarter of the way around the cone's base from the emerging flood and started to climb on foot, both carrying burdens.

Forty-seven minutes later they returned empty-handed to the vehicle, to find that it had been engulfed by the spreading liquid.

With noticeable haste they floundered through the loose ash a few yards above the base until they had outdistanced the glowing menace, descended and started back across the plain to where they knew the ship to be, though she was invisible through the falling detritus. Once they had to detour around a crack. Once they encountered one which widened toward the chasm on their right, and they knew a detour would be impossible. Leaping it seemed impossible, too, but they did it. Thirty seconds after this, forty minutes after finding the tractor destroyed, the landscape was bathed in a magnesium-white glare as the two one-and-a-half kiloton charges planted just inside the crater rim let go.

"SHOULD WE go back and see if it worked?" asked Zaino.

"What's the use? The only other charges we had were in the tractor. Thank goodness they were nuclear instead of H. E. If it didn't work we'd have more trouble to get back than we're having now."

"If it didn't work, is there any point in going back?"

"Stop quibbling and keep walking. Dr. Burkett, are you listening?"

"Yes, Captain."

"We're fresh out of tractors, but if you want to try it on foot you might start a set of flow measures on the lava. Arnie wants to know whether our landslide slid properly."

However, the two were able to tell for themselves before getting back to the *Albireo.*

The flow didn't stop all at once, of course; but with the val-

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ley feeding it blocked off by a pile of volcanic ash four hundred feet high on one side, nearly fifty on the other and more than a quarter of a mile long, its enthusiasm quickly subsided. It was thin, fluid stuff, as Burkett had noted; but as it spread it cooled, and as it cooled it thickened.

Six hours after the blast it had stopped with its nearest lobe almost a mile from the ship, less than two feet thick at the edge.

When Mardikian's tractor arrived, Burkett was happily trying to analyze samples of the flow, and less happily speculating on how long it would be before the entire area would be blown off the planet. When Marini's and Harmon's vehicles arrived, almost together, the specimens had been loaded and everything stowed for acceleration. Sixty seconds after the last person was aboard, the *Albireo* left Mercury's surface at two gravities.

The haste, it turned out, wasn't really necessary. She had been in parking orbit nearly forty-five hours before the first of the giant volcanoes reached its climax, and the one beside their former site was not the first. It was the fourth.

"And that seems to be that," said Camille Burkett rather tritely as they drifted a hundred miles above the little world's surface.

"Just a belt of white-hot calderas all around the planet. Pretty, if you like symmetry."

"I like being able to see it from this distance," replied Zaino, floating weightless beside her. "By the way, how much bonus should I ask for getting that idea of putting the seismic charges to use after all?"

"I wouldn't mention it. Any one of us might have thought of that. We all knew about them."

"Anyone *might* have. Let's speculate on how long it would have been before anyone *did*."

"It's still not like the other idea, which involved your own specialty. I still don't see what made you suppose that the gas pillar from the volcano would be heavily charged enough to reflect your radio beam. How did that idea strike you?"

ZAINO THOUGHT back, and smiled a little as the picture of lightning blazing around pillar, cloud and mountain rose before his eyes.

"You're not quite right," he said. "I was worried about it for a while, but it didn't actually strike me."

It fell rather flat; Camille Burkett, Ph.D., had to have it explained to her.

— HAL CLEMENT

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It has happened a hundred times in the long history of Earth — and, sooner or later, will happen again!

THE GREAT NEBRASKA SEA

EVERYONE — all the geologists, at any rate — had known about the Kiowa Fault for years. That was before there was anything very interesting to know about it. The first survey of Colorado traced its course north and south in the narrow valley of Kiowa Creek about twenty miles east of Denver; it extended south to the Arkansas River. And that was about all even the professionals were interested in knowing. There was never so much as a landslide to bring the Fault to the attention of the general public.

It was still a matter of academic interest when in the late '40s geologists speculated on the relationship between the Kiowa Fault and the Conchas Fault far-

By ALLAN DANZIG **Illustrated by WOOD**

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ther south, in New Mexico, and which followed the Pecos as far south as Texas.

Nor was there much in the papers a few years later when it was suggested that the Niobrara Fault (just inside and roughly parallel to the eastern border of Wyoming) was a northerly extension of the Kiowa. By the mid sixties it was definitely established that the three Faults were in fact a single line of fissure in the essential rock, stretching almost from the Canadian border well south of the New Mexico-Texas line.

It is not really surprising that it took so long to figure out the connection. The population of the states affected was in places as low as five people per square mile! The land was so dry it seemed impossible that it could ever be used except for sheep-farming.

It strikes us today as ironic that from the late '50s there was grave concern about the level of the watertable throughout the entire area.

THE EVEN more ironic solution to the problem began in the summer of 1973. It had been a particularly hot and dry August, and the Forestry Service was keeping an anxious eye out for the fires it knew it could expect. Dense smoke was reported rising above a virtually uninhabited area along Black Squirrel Creek, and a plane was sent out for a report.

The report was — no fire at all. The rising cloud was not smoke, but dust. Thousands of cubic feet of dry earth rising lazily on the summer air. Rock slides, they guessed; certainly no fire. The Forestry Service had other worries at the moment, and filed the report.

But after a week had gone by, the town of Edison, a good twenty miles away from the slides, was still complaining of the dust. Springs were going dry, too, apparently from underground disturbances. Not even in the Rockies could anyone remember a series of rock slides as bad as this.

Newspapers in the mountain states gave it a few inches on the front page; anything is news in late August. And the geologists became interested. Seismologists were reporting unusual activity in the area, tremors too severe to be rock slides. Volcanic activity? Specifically, a dust volcano? Unusual, they knew, but right on the Kiowa Fault — could be.

Labor Day crowds read the scientific conjectures with late summer lassitude. Sunday supplements ran four-color artists' conceptions of the possible volcano. "Only Active Volcano in

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U. S.?" demanded the headlines, and some papers even left off the question mark.

It may seem odd that the simplest explanation was practically not mentioned. Only Joseph Schwartzberg, head geographer of the Department of the Interior, wondered if the disturbance might not be a settling of the Kiowa Fault. His suggestion was mentioned on page nine or ten of the Monday newspapers (page 27 of the New York *Times*). The idea was not nearly so exciting as a volcano, even a lava-less one, and you couldn't draw a very dramatic picture of it.

To excuse the other geologists, it must be said that the Kiowa Fault had never acted up before. It never sidestepped, never jiggled, never, never produced the regular shows of its little sister out in California, which almost daily bounced San Francisco or Los Angeles, or some place in between. The dust volcano was on the face of it a more plausible theory.

Still, it was only a theory. It had to be proved. As the tremors grew bigger, along with the affected area, as several towns including Edison were shaken to pieces by incredible earthquakes, whole bus- and plane-loads of geologists set out for Colorado, without even waiting for their university and government departments to approve budgets.

They found, of course, that Schwartzberg had been perfectly correct.

THEY FOUND themselves on the scene of what was fast becoming the most violent and widespread earthquake North America—probably the world—has ever seen in historic times. To describe it in the simplest terms, land east of the Fault was settling, and at a precipitous rate.

Rock scraped rock with a whining roar. Shuddery as a squeaky piece of chalk raked across a blackboard, the noise was deafening. The surfaces of the land east and west of the Fault seemed no longer to have any relation to each other. To the west, tortured rock reared into cliffs. East, where sharp reports and muffled wheezes told of continued buckling and dropping, the earth trembled downward. Atop the new cliffs, which seemed to grow by sudden inches from heaving rubble, dry earth fissured and trembled, sliding acres at a time to fall, smoking, into the bucking, heaving bottom of the depression.

There the devastation was even more thorough, if less spectacular. Dry earth churned like mud, and rock shards weighing tons bumped and rolled about like pebbles as they shivered and

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cracked into pebbles themselves. "It looks like sand dancing in a child's sieve," said the normally impassive Schwartzberg in a nationwide broadcast from the scene of disaster. "No one here has ever seen anything like it." And the landslip was growing, north and south along the Fault.

"Get out while you can," Schwartzberg urged the population of the affected area. "When it's over you can come back and pick up the pieces." But the band of scientists who had rallied to his leadership privately wondered if there would be any pieces.

The Arkansas River, at Avondale and North Avondale, was sluggishly backing north into the deepening trough. At the rate things were going, there might be a new lake the entire length of El Paso and Pueblo Counties. And, warned Schwartzberg, this might only be the beginning.

By 16 September the landslip had crept down the Huerfano River past Cedarwood. Avondale, North Avondale and Boone had totally disappeared. Land west of the Fault was holding firm, though Denver had recorded several small tremors; everywhere east of the Fault, to almost twenty miles away, the now-familiar lurch and steady fall had already sent several thousand Coloradans scurrying for safety.

All mountain climbing was prohibited on the Eastern Slope because of the danger of rock slides from minor quakes. The geologists went home to wait.

There wasn't much to wait for. The news got worse and worse. The Platte River, now, was creating a vast mud puddle where the town of Orchard had been. Just below Masters, Colorado, the river leaped 70-foot cliffs to add to the heaving chaos below. And the cliffs were higher every day as the land beneath them groaned downward in mile-square gulps.

As the Fault moved north and south, new areas quivered into unwelcome life. Fields and whole mountainsides moved with deceptive sloth down, down. They danced "like sand in a sieve"; dry, they boiled into rubble. Telephone lines, railroad tracks, roads snapped and simply disappeared. Virtually all east-west land communication was suspended, and the President declared a national emergency.

BY 23 September the Fault was active well into Wyoming on the north, and rapidly approaching the border of New Mexico to the south. Trinchera and Branson were totally evacuated, but even so the over-all death toll had risen above 1,000.

Away to the east the situation was quiet but even more omi-

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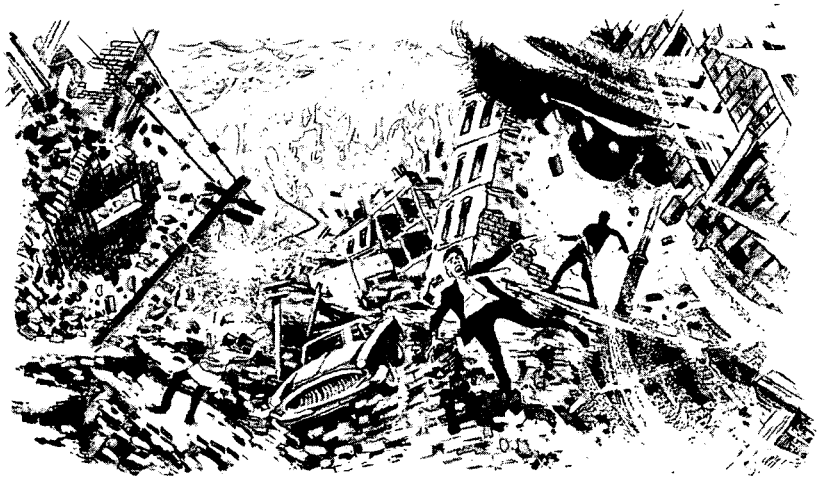

nous. Tremendous fissures opened up perpendicular to the Fault, and a general subsidence of the land was noticeable well into Kansas and Nebraska. The western borders of these states, and soon of the Dakotas and Oklahoma as well, were slowly sinking.

On the actual scene of the disaster (or the scenes; it is impossible to speak of anything this size in the singular) there was a horrifying confusion. Prairie and hill cracked open under intolerable strains as the land shuddered downward in gasps and leaps. Springs burst to the surface in hot geysers and explosions of steam.

The downtown section of North Platte, Nebraska, dropped eight feet, just like that, on the afternoon of 4 October. "We must remain calm," declared the Governor of Nebraska. "We must sit this thing out. Be assured that everything possible is being done." But what could be done, with his state dropping straight down at a mean rate of a foot a day?

The Fault nicked off the southeast corner of Montana. It worked its way north along the Little Missouri. South, it ripped past Roswell, New Mexico, and tore down the Pecos toward Texas. All the upper reaches of the Missouri were standing puddles by now, and the Red River west of Paris, Texas, had begin to run backward.

Soon the Missouri began slowly slipping away westward over the slowly churning land. Abandoning its bed, the river spread uncertainly across farmland and

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prairie, becoming a sea of mud beneath the sharp new cliffs which rose in rending line, ever taller as the land continued to sink, almost from Canada to the Mexican border. There were virtually no floods, in the usual sense. The water moved too slowly, spread itself with no real direction or force. But the vast sheets of sluggish water and jelly-like mud formed death-traps for the countless refugees now streaming east.

Perhaps the North Platte disaster had been more than anyone could take. 193 people had died in that one cave-in. Certainly by 7 October it had to be officially admitted that there was an exodus of epic proportion. Nearly two million people were on the move, and the U. S. was faced with a gigantic wave of refugees. Rails, roads and air-lanes were jammed with terrified hordes who had left everything behind to crowd eastward.

All through October hollow-eyed motorists flocked into Tulsa, Topeka, Omaha, Sioux Falls and Fargo. St. Louis was made distributing center for emergency squads which flew everywhere with milk for babies and dog food for evacuating pets. Gasoline trucks boomed west to meet the demand for gas, but once inside the "zone of terror," as the newspapers now called it, they found their route blocked by eastbound cars on the wrong side of the road. Shops left by their fleeing owners were looted by refugees from further west; an American Airlines plane was wrecked by a mob of would-be passengers in Bismarck, North Dakota. Federal and State troops were called out, but moving two million people was not to be done in an orderly way.

And still the landslip grew larger. The new cliffs gleamed in the autumn sunshine, growing higher as the land beneath them continued its inexorable descent.

On 21 October, at Lubbock, Texas, there was a noise variously described as a hollow roar, a shriek and a deep musical vibration like a church bell. It was simply the tortured rock of the substrata giving way. The second phase of the national disaster was beginning.

THE NOISE traveled due east at better than 85 miles per hour. In its wake the earth to the north "just seemed to collapse on itself like a punctured balloon," read one newspaper report. "Like a cake that's failed," said a Texarkana housewife who fortunately lived a block *south* of Thayer Street, where the fissure raced through. There was a sigh and a great cloud of dust, and Oklahoma subsided at the astounding

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rate of about six feet per hour.

At Biloxi, on the Gulf, there had been uneasy shufflings under foot all day. "Not tremors, exactly," said the captain of a fishing boat which was somehow to ride out the coming flood, "but like as if the land wanted to be somewhere else."

Everyone in doomed Biloxi would have done well to have been somewhere else that evening. At approximately 8:30 p.m. the town shuddered, seemed to rise a little like the edge of a hall carpet caught in a draft, and sank. So did the entire Mississippi and Alabama coast, at about the same moment. The tidal wave which was to gouge the center from the U. S. marched on the land.

From the north shore of Lake Ponchartrain to the Appalachicola River in Florida, the Gulf coast simply disappeared. Gulfport, Biloxi, Mobile, Pensacola, Panama City: 200 miles of shoreline vanished, with over two and a half million people. An hour later a wall of water had swept over every town from Dothan, Alabama, to Bogalusa on the Louisiana-Mississippi border.

"We must keep panic from our minds," said the Governor of Alabama in a radio message delivered from a hastily arranged all-station hookup. "We of the gallant southland have faced and withstood invasion before." Then, as ominous creakings and groanings of the earth announced the approach of the tidal wave, he flew out of Montgomery half an hour before the town disappeared forever.

One head of the wave plunged north, eventually to spend itself in the hills south of Birmingham. The main sweep followed the lowest land. Reaching west, it swallowed Vicksburg and nicked the corner of Louisiana. The whole of East Carroll Parish was scoured from the map.

The Mississippi River now ended at about Eudora, Arkansas, and minute by minute the advancing flood bit away miles of river bed, swelling north. Chicot, Jennie, Lake Village, Arkansas City, Snow Lake, Elaine, Helena and Memphis felt the tremors. The tormented city shuddered through the night. The earth continued its descent, eventually tipping 2½ degrees down to the west. The "Memphis Tilt" is today one of the unique and charming characteristics of the gracious Old Town, but during the night of panic Memphis residents were sure they were doomed.

SOUTH and west the waters carved deeply into Arkansas and Oklahoma. By morning it was plain that all of Arkansas was going under. Waves ad-

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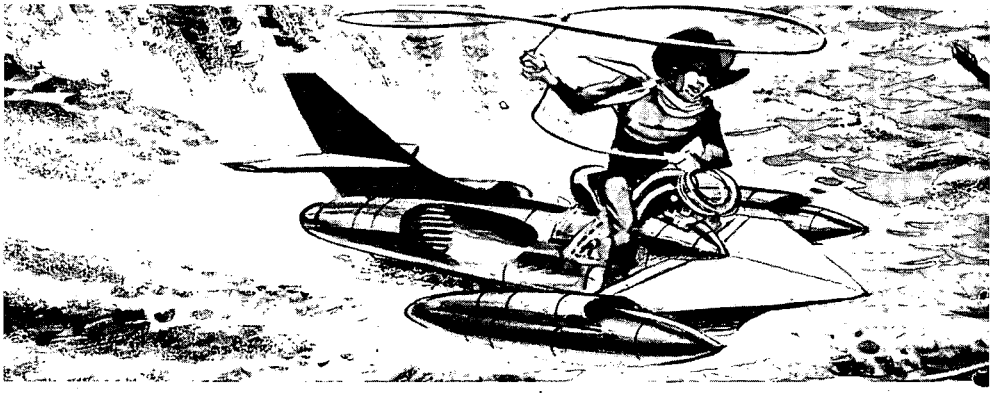

vanced on Little Rock at almost 100 miles an hour, new crests forming, overtopping the wave's leading edge as towns, hills and the thirst of the soil temporarily broke the furious charge.

Washington announced the official hope that the Ozarks would stop the wild gallop of the unleashed Gulf, for in northwest Arkansas the land rose to over 2,000 feet. But nothing could save Oklahoma. By noon the water reached clutching fingers around Mt. Scott and Elk Mountain, deluging Hobart and almost all of Greer County.

Despite hopeful announcements that the wave was slowing, had virtually stopped after inundating Oklahoma City, was being swallowed up in the desert near Amarillo, the wall of water continued its advance. For the land was still sinking, and the floods were constantly replenished from the Gulf. Schwartzberg and his geologists advised the utmost haste in evacuating the entire area between Colorado and Missouri, from Texas to North Dakota.

Lubbock, Texas, went under. On a curling reflex the tidal wave blotted out Sweetwater and Big Spring. The Texas panhandle disappeared in one great swirl.

Whirlpools opened. A great welter of smashed wood and human debris was sucked under, vomited up and pounded to pieces. Gulf-water crashed on the cliffs of New Mexico and fell back on itself in foam. Would-be rescuers on the cliffs along what had been the west bank of the Pecos River afterwards recalled the hiss and scream like tearing silk as the water broke furiously on the newly exposed rock. It was the most terrible sound they had ever heard.

"We couldn't hear any shouts, of course, not that far away and with all the noise," said Dan Weaver, Mayor of Carlsbad. "But

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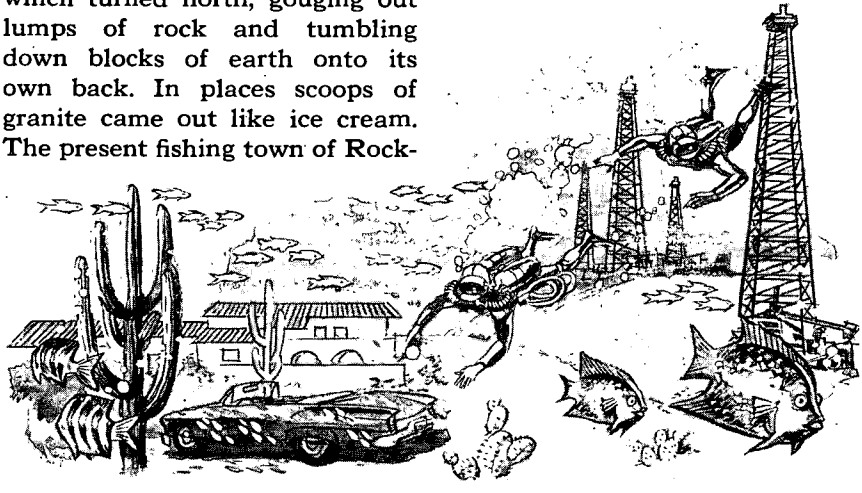
we knew there were people down there. When the water hit the cliffs, it was like a collision between two solid bodies. We couldn't see for over an hour, because of the spray."

Salt spray. The ocean had come to New Mexico.

THE CLIFFS proved to be the only effective barrier against the westward march of the water, which turned north, gouging out lumps of rock and tumbling down blocks of earth onto its own back. In places scoops of granite came out like ice cream. The present fishing town of Rockport, Colorado, is built on a harbor created in such a way.

The water had found its farthest westering. But still it poured north along the line of the original Fault. Irresistible fingers closed on Sterling, Colorado, on Sidney, Nebraska, on Hot Springs, South Dakota. The entire tier of states settled, from south to north, down to its eventual place of stability one thou-



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sand feet below the level of the new sea.

Memphis was by now a seaport. The Ozarks, islands in a mad sea, formed precarious havens for half-drowned humanity. Waves bit off a corner of Missouri, flung themselves on Wichita. Topeka, Lawrence and Belleville were the last Kansas towns to disappear. The Governor of Kansas went down with his State.

Daniel Bernd of Lincoln, Nebraska, was washed up half-drowned in a cove of the Wyoming cliffs, having been sucked from one end of vanished Nebraska to the other. Similar hairbreadth escapes were recounted on radio and television.

Virtually the only people saved out of the entire population of Pierre, South Dakota were the six members of the Creeth family. Plucky Timothy Creeth carried and dragged his aged parents to the loft of their barn on the outskirts of town. His brother Geoffrey brought along the younger children and what provisions they could find—"Mostly a ham and about half a ton of vanilla cookies," he explained to his eventual rescuers. The barn, luckily collapsing in the vibrations as the waves bore down on them, became an ark in which they rode out the disaster.

"We must of played cards for four days straight," recalled genial Mrs. Creeth when she afterwards appeared on a popular television spectacular. Her rural good-humor undamaged by an ordeal few women can ever have been called on to face, she added, "We sure wondered why flushes never came out right. Jimanettly, we'd left the king of hearts behind, in the rush!"

But such lightheartedness and such happy endings were by no means typical. The world could only watch aghast as the water raced north under the shadow of the cliffs which occasionally crumbled, roaring, into the roaring waves. Day by day the relentless rush swallowed what had been dusty farmland, cities and towns.

Some people were saved by the helicopters which flew mercy missions just ahead of the advancing waters. Some found safety in the peaks of western Nebraska and the Dakotas. But when the waters came to rest along what is roughly the present shoreline of our inland sea, it was estimated that over fourteen million people had lost their lives.

No one could even estimate the damage to property; almost the entirety of eight states, and portions of twelve others, had simply vanished from the heart of the North American continent forever.

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IT WAS in such a cataclysmic birth that the now-peaceful Nebraska Sea came to America.

Today, nearly one hundred years after the unprecedented —and happily unrepeated—disaster, it is hard to remember the terror and despair of those weeks in October and November, 1973. It is inconceivable to think of the United States without its beautiful and economically essential curve of interior ocean. Two-thirds as long as the Mediterranean, it graduates from the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico through the equally blue waves of the Mississippi Bight, becoming cooler and greener north and west of the pleasant fishing isles of the Ozark Archipelago, finally shading into the gray-green chop of the Gulf of Dakota.

What would the United States have become without the 5600-mile coastline of our inland sea? It is only within the last twenty years that any but the topmost layer of water has cleared sufficiently to permit a really extensive fishing industry. Mud still held in suspension by the restless waves will not precipitate fully even in our lifetimes. Even so, the commercial fisheries of Missouri and Wyoming contribute no small part to the nation's economy.

Who can imagine what the middle west must have been like before the amelioration of climate brought about by the proximity of a warm sea? The now-temperate state of Minnesota (to say nothing of the submerged Dakotas) must have been Siberian. From contemporary accounts Missouri, our second California, was unbelievably muggy, almost uninhabitable during the summer months. Our climate today, from Ohio and North Carolina to the rich fields of New Mexico and the orchards of Montana, is directly ameliorated by the marine heart of the continent.

Who today could imagine the United States without the majestic sea-cliffs in stately parade from New Mexico to Montana? The beaches of Wyoming, the American Riviera, where fruit trees grow almost to the water's edge? Or incredible Colorado, where the morning skier is the afternoon bather, thanks to the monorail connecting the highest peaks with the glistening white beaches?

Of course there have been losses to balance slightly these strong gains. The Mississippi was, before 1973, one of the great rivers of the world. Taken together with its main tributary, the Missouri, it vied favorably with such giant systems as the Amazon and the Ganges. Now, ending as it does at Memphis

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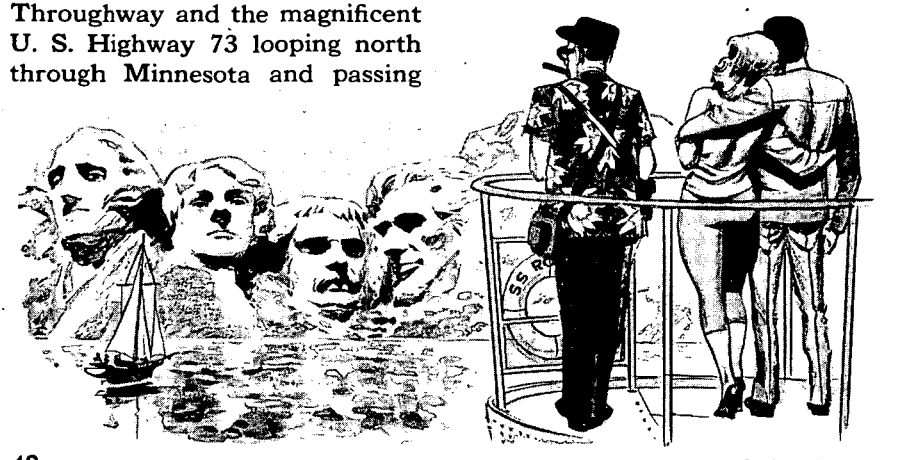
and drawing its water chiefly from the Appalachian Mountains, it is only a slight remnant of what it was. And though the Nebraska Sea today carries many times the tonnage of shipping in its ceaseless traffic, we have lost the old romance of river shipping. We may only guess what it was like when we look upon the Ohio and the truncated Mississippi.

And transcontinental shipping is somewhat more difficult, with trucks and the freight-railroads obliged to take the sea-ferries across the Nebraska Sea. We shall never know what the United States was like with its numerous coast-to-coast highways busy with trucks and private cars. Still, the ferry ride is certainly a welcome break after days of driving, and for those who wish a glimpse of what it must have been like, there is always the Cross-Canada Throughway and the magnificent U. S. Highway 73 looping north through Minnesota and passing through the giant port of Alexis, North Dakota, shipping center for the wheat of Manitoba and crossroad of a nation.

THE POLITICAL situation has long been a thorny problem. Only tattered remnants of the eight submerged states remained after the flood, but none of them wanted to surrender its autonomy. The tiny fringe of Kansas seemed, for a time, ready to merge with contiguous Missouri, but following the lead of the Arkansas Forever faction, the remaining population decided to retain political integrity. This has resulted in the continuing anomaly of the seven "fringe States" represented in Congress by the usual two Senators each, though the largest of them is barely the size of Connecticut and all are economically indistinguishable



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from their neighboring states.

Fortunately it was decided some years ago that Oklahoma, only one of the eight to have completely disappeared, could not in any sense be considered to have a continuing political existence. So, though there are still families who proudly call themselves Oklahomans, and the Oklahoma Oil Company continues to pump oil from its submerged real estate, the state has in fact disappeared from the American political scene.

But this is by now no more than a petty annoyance, to raise a smile when the talk gets around to the question of State's Rights. Not even the tremendous price the country paid for its new sea—fourteen million dead, untold property destroyed—really offsets the asset we enjoy today. The heart of the continent, now open to the shipping of the world, was once dry and land-locked, cut off from the bustle of trade and the ferment of world culture.

It would indeed seem odd to an American of the '50s or '60s of the last century to imagine sailors from the merchant fleets of every nation walking the streets of Denver, fresh ashore at Newport, only fifteen miles away. Or to imagine Lincoln, Fargo, Kansas City and Dallas as world ports and great manufacturing centers. Utterly beyond their ken would be Roswell, New Mexico; Benton, Wyoming; Westport, Missouri, and the other new ports of over a million inhabitants each which have developed on the new harbors of the inland sea.

Unimaginable too would have been the general growth of population in the states surrounding the new sea. As the water tables rose and manufacturing and trade moved in to take advantage of the just-created axis of world communication, a population explosion was touched off of which we are only now seeing the diminuation. This new westering is to be ranked with the first surge of pioneers which created the American west. But what a difference! Vacation paradises bloom, a new fishing industry thrives; her water road is America's main artery of trade, and fleets of all the world sail . . . where once the prairie schooner made its laborious and dusty way west!

—ALLAN DANZIG

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EARTHBOUND

He wanted above anything else to go into space. He had been waiting for it — a long time!

By LESTER DEL REY

IT WAS hours after the last official ceremony before Clifton could escape the crowd of planetlubbers with their babblings, their eligible daughters and their stupid self-admiration. They'd paid through the nose to get him here, and they meant to get their money's worth.

The exit led only to a little balcony, but it seemed to be deserted. He took a deep breath of the night air and his eyes moved unconsciously toward the stars.

Coming back to Earth had been a mistake, but he'd needed the money. Space Products Unlimited wanted a real deepspace hero to help celebrate its hundredth anniversary. He had just finished the Regulation of Rigel, so he'd been picked. Damn them and their silly speeches and awards — and damn Earth! What was one planet when there were a billion up there among the stars?

From the other side of a potted plant there was a soft sigh.

Clifton swung his head, then relaxed as he saw the other man was not looking at him. The eyes behind the dark glasses were directed toward the sky.

"Aldebaran, Sirius, Deneb, Alpha Centauri," the voice whis-

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pered. It was a high-pitched voice with an odd accent, but there was the poetry of ancient yearning in it.

He was a small, shriveled old man. His shoulders were bent. A long beard and the dark glasses covered most of his face, but could not entirely conceal the deep wrinkles, even in the moonlight.

Clifton felt a sudden touch of pity and moved closer, without quite knowing why. "Didn't I see you on the platform?"

"Your memory is very good, Captain. I was awarded publicly — for fifty years of faithful service making space boots. Well, I was always a good cobbler, and perhaps my boots helped some men out there." The old man's hand swept toward the stars, then fell back to grip the railing tightly. "They gave me a gold watch, though time means nothing to me. And a cheap world cruise ticket. As if there were any spot on this world I could still want to see." He laughed harshly. "Forgive me if I sound bitter. But, you see, I've never been off Earth!"

Clifton stared at him incredulously. "But everyone —"

"Everyone but me," the old man said. "Oh, I tried. I was utterly weary of Earth and I looked at the stars and dreamed. But I failed the early rigid physicals. Then, when things were easier, I tried again. A plague grounded the first ship. A strike delayed another. Then one exploded on the pad and only a few on board were saved. It was then I realized I was meant to wait here — here on Earth, and nowhere else. So I stayed, making space boots."

PITY AND impulse forced unexpected words to Clifton's lips. "I'm taking off for Rigel again in four hours, and there's a spare cabin on the *Maryloo*. You're coming with me."

The old hand that gripped his arm was oddly gentle. "Bless you, Captain. But it would never work. I'm under orders to remain here."

"Nobody can order a man grounded forever. You're coming with me if I have to drag you, Mr.—"

"Ahasuerus."

The old man hesitated, as if expecting the name to mean something. Then he sighed and lifted his dark glasses.

Clifton met the other's gaze for less than a second. Then his own eyes dropped, though memory of what he had seen was already fading. He vaulted over the balcony railing and began running away from Ahasuerus, toward his ship and the unconfined reaches of space.

Behind him, the eternal wanderer tarried and waited.

— LESTER DEL REY

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THE PROBLEM MAKERS

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By ROBERT HOSKINS

Illustrated by MACK

They had only one mission in the Galaxy, with its infinite problems — make more of 'em!

I

CLOUDS obscured the three moons as the men slipped into the village. They eased the double-bitted axes out of their belts and felt their way through the almost unrelieved blackness until their hands met the soft yieldings of the door hangings. Waiting until the whisper of leather gliding over the ground stopped, telling him everyone was in position, Luke Royceton drew in a deep breath, then suddenly screamed:

"Aiieeeee!"

At his banshee signal, the other men took up the cry. Somebody kicked the banked coals of the cooking fire into life and stuck in a handful of twisted grass torches, then moved from man to man, handing them out. The men screamed again, touched their torches to the overhanging of the huts, then tore down the hangings and leaped through the doors, torches flaming a path.

The interiors of the huts leaped to life. Forms hurtled by the men and into the night as the pitch-caulked thatching blazed into an inferno. The rightful inhabitants of the huts crashed into the tall grass of the surrounding plains, the sounds of their passage quickly dying away as fear

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lent wing to their rapidly fleeing heels.

The fires quickly burned through the thatching, sending little fingers of flame dancing along the lashed saplings that supported the roofs. Luke took one last look around the interior of his hut and started to leave, when he spotted something wriggling under a pile of skins.

Crossing the room in three strides, he tore away the coverings and grabbed the native child by the scruff of its neck. He wheeled on one heel and retraced his passage. He got out of the door just as the saplings gave up the ghost and the fiery mass crashed to the ground.

Luke whistled and wiped sweat from his brow. The bronze head of the axe caught and reflected the fires from its myriad beaten facets. Using the head, he beat out several sparks that had landed on his clothes, then turned his attention to the child who still dangled from his other hand.

The child's eyes were rolled nearly into his head with his fright. Luke grinned, baring his teeth. He brought the child up until their noses were less than an inch apart. The fetid smell of the child's breath made him choke. Yelping, the child twisted free and ran after its already-departed parents.

Luke laughed and turned his attention to his team.

The men were all out now, watching the huts crack under the intense heat within. One shuddered, then collapsed inward, sending up choking clouds of dust as it smothered the flames. After a moment, Luke whistled. Half of the men melted into the grass and followed the natives, while the others gathered around him, squatting and resting their axes on the ground. Luke waited until the others returned to report no further sign of the villagers, then he squatted himself, and accepted a canteen from someone. He drank his fill, gasped, wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and handed the canteen back.

"It's hot," he said, conversationally.

"It'll be hotter before we're done," said one of the team. They were all dressed in rough-cured skins and leather moccasins. The axes were the only tool they carried. Faces thick with war paint and grime, it was impossible to tell them from natives.

"Anybody hurt?" asked Luke. Disclaimers came from the various members of the group. "Good." He stood up and stretched. "Well, gentlemen, shall we be on our way?"

"Might as well."

Luke took his axe, twisted the

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unfinished handle a quarter-turn in his socket, then held the head to his lips. "Team B," he said. "Mission accomplished." He twisted the handle back and slipped the axe into his belt. A few moments later, the soft chatter of rotors cut through the air, and a copter dropped into the clearing by the cooking fire.

The team mounted by the dying glow of the fires. As soon as the last man was in, the door swung shut and the copter took off into the night.

SAM CARTER eased the scratchy material of the ruffed collar away from his neck, then shot his cuffs to return them to the socially acceptable half-inch showing beyond his jacket sleeve. He sighed, placed his hands on his knees and glanced for the umpteenth time at the armored soldiers guarding the door between the anteroom and Prince Kahl's private chambers. The afternoon sun dipped below the level of the high window-slits, sending shadows scampering up the walls.

Sam had been waiting since noon. His stomach was repeating its rumbled protests against that interrupted meal. Prince Kahl had sent word that Sam might wait upon his pleasure; quieting misgivings, Carter had rushed to do just that.

He sighed again, and stifled a yawn. From the corner of his eye, he watched the shadow line marching up the wall. When it touched the cobwebby corner of the ceiling, a slave came in and lighted a pair of oil lamps. The soot-heavy smoke they gave off quickly had Sam wishing the room had been left in darkness.

Another interminable hour passed, during which he several times repeated the operation with collar and cuffs, all the while envying the guards their ability to remain in one position like frozen statues, seemingly carved from the living rock of the palace. At last, just when he had resigned himself to the probability of spending the night in the anteroom, the inner door swung open and a chamberlain beckoned.

"Prince Kahl will grant you a moment now."

Sam bowed his thanks, and followed the man into Kahl's chambers.

"Ah, my friend from the southern kingdoms!"

Prince Kahl was a lean, saturnine individual, uncomfortably aware that the prime of life was slipping through his grasp while his father obstinately held onto the throne. It was Kahl's considered opinion that the old man had lived long enough. It rankled him to realize that he had held the same opinions as a

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youth barely out of his teens. The thirty intervening years had been spent devising and trying methods to assure his succession; unfortunately his father had twenty years before that to safeguard his own rule.

"How go the southern kingdoms, my friend?" Kahl waved a particularly enticing fruit as Carter stopped short, a dozen paces away.

"Tolerably well, your graciousness." He neglected to add that it had been nearly a year since he had visited the supposed lands of his birth. Kahl was fully aware how long Carter had been kept cooling his heels. Palace protocol dictated how long foreign visitors might be kept waiting. But even visiting royalty could not hope for an audience in less than a month's time. In his role as ambassador, Carter was happy that a year was all he had been kept waiting.

"YOUR lord and master's gifts were received," said Kahl. "You may inform him of my royal gratitude."

"My humble thanks, your graciousness." Sam's mouth watered as Kahl polished off the one fruit and selected another from a platter born by a manservant. Despite his now-long stay on the planet, Sam still could not understand why women were given no role at all in society, even as slaves.

"Not at all, not at all," said Kahl. "Now tell me. What is it that brought you so far from your home lands to grace my humble presence?"

"The usual business of politic, your graciousness," said Sam, growing weary of the necessity to repeat the title with every reply to Kahl's words. He also wished for a chair, despite the fact that he had been sitting all afternoon. He felt like a naughty schoolchild, standing always in the man's presence. "Trade treaties, mutual armament pacts, the like."

"Ummm, so. You've discussed them with my ministers?"

"They have permitted me this honor and, if I may be so bold, found a great deal to our mutual liking. Our countries are indeed far separated, and the journey between arduous. I find much in your provinces in the way of technology and armaments that we totally lack. By the same token, I have thought of a few inconsequential things which might serve to ease your royal burdens, if but brought from my lands."

"Possible, possible," said Kahl. "Of course, I have a large college of tinkerers and mechanics who probably would have produced the little toys you speak of in

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their own good time. But why duplicate effort, eh? They are lazy dolts who grumble at my royal largesse as it is." He chortled lustily, although Sam could see nothing even remotely humorous in his statement. But he was well-schooled in the idiocies of diplomacy; he laughed dutifully.

"But come!" said Kahl. "Enough of childish prattle! You carry another load in your thoughts, my southern friend. Have out with it!"

"Your graciousness?"

"You needn't pretend," he said, chortling again. "My ministers are like the winds. They cannot keep a single thing to themselves, but instead need spread it over the far reaches of the entire world. You've been talking — foolishly perhaps — but I have perceived a certain sense within your nonsense, and I must confess that your words have aroused my interest. You have a plan to see me king. Now out with it, lest I make you a gift of you to my torturer. He can remove anything — including stubborn vocal cords!"

"You do me undeserved honor, graciousness," said Sam.

"Undoubtedly. And you begin to weary me."

"Very well." Sam sighed. "I must admit that my tongue is too loose for my own general welfare. It is true that I once thought of something mildly amusing while passing long evening hours with one of your ministers. But it was mere idle dreaming, no more."

"You prattle long, southerner." Kahl's eyelids lowered suspiciously. He picked up a silver knife and began paring his nails, scattering the shavings suggestively in Sam's direction. "Perhaps you do not want to see me king?"

"There is none so deserving of the honor as you," said Sam. "But while you laugh at the utter childishness of my ideas, please remember that you insisted . . ."

THE Ehrlan delegate to the Central Worlds Conference was well past the entrance to the Park when the pudgy little man caught up with him, sides heaving from the unaccustomed strain of running.

"Citizen Lund!" he cried, panting. "Please wait!"

Lund turned and eyed the little man suspiciously. The fellow was a stranger, and therefore automatically under suspicion. "Yes?"

"A moment of your valuable time, Citizen. Please? I assure you, you have nothing to fear from *me*. I am not a Yanoian." The name spattered out acidly.

"Indeed?" said Lund. "And just who, then, are you?" There was a vague sensation of familiar-

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ity troubling the back of his mind. The omnipresent watchdog in his subconscious pounced instantly on the feeling, magnifying it, turning it inside out and shaking it around, but drawing no satisfaction from the act.

"A friend, Citizen. You must believe that. I can't explain further right now — time is too precious." He grabbed Lund's arm and started tugging him back towards the Park entrance. "Please? I beg you, come."

"Oh—very well." He gave in ungraciously, following the man until they were just inside the Park. Then Lund stopped, digging his heels into the gravel of the walk. The man looked back at him.

"Please, Citizen!" he urged. "We don't have much time!"

'So far as I'm concerned, you don't have any time at all, unless you tell me right now who you are and what this is all about."

"Not here!" he cried, aghast, as he glanced nervously around at the many people entering and leaving the Park. A pair of Conference monitors stopped just outside the gate, fingering their stun-beamers as they eyed the actions of the two men. They started to move into the violable hundred-foot circle this side of the gate. The little man moved quickly, grabbing Lund again and forcibly pulling him beyond the protection of the monitors. Their skins tingled as they went through the shimmering haze of the force screen. The monitors stopped just in time to avoid touching the screen, while Lund and the little man hurried down a path that wound into a copse of widdy trees from Lund's own homeworld, Ehrla.

The widdy tendrils stopped their aimless flowing through the trees and curved down and around the two men, tips melting into the ground and tendrils broadening into wide blades that sheltered and shielded the pair from possible watchers.

"Now!" said Lund, shaking the other man's hand from his angrily. "Perhaps you will do me the honor of telling me who you are and just what in the name of the Seven Holy Suns this idiocy is all about?"

"A matter of the gravest urgency, Citizen! You must not present your plans for redistribution of Sector protectorates to this Conference!"

"What?" Lund stared at him in disbelief. "And just how did you learn of the plans I intend to present to the Conference — I *will* present, at this afternoon session? Something smacks of treachery!"

"Never mind how I learned, Citizen. The important thing is the Yano delegation also knows!

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They plan to scuttle you before you have a chance to speak. After that, they'll cut you into little pieces and devour you!"

"You're insane, man!" Lund started to reach for the widdy tendrils.

"Don't! You must not present your plans to the Conference, Citizen."

A new tone had crept into the man's voice: a strength that belied the pudginess and general clownishness of the figure. Lund turned slowly, and found himself staring at a stunner, the winking red of the telltale showing that it was set to lethal bands.

"Wha . . ." He gulped his adam's apple back down into his throat. "How did you get that into the Park? The force screens aren't supposed to pass weapons."

"There are ways, Citizen," the man said, grinning. No longer did he seem clownish. "Many so-called impossible things are quite simple, if only you have access to the proper people and controls."

"What do you really want?" Lund tried to hide his fright, but he was uncomfortably certain that it was radiating out from him, broadcasting to the entire world that Citizen Lund was scared silly.

"I told you, Citizen. You must not present your plans to the Conference."

"But why?" he wailed, in frustration. "Give me a logical reason!"

"The greater good, Citizen." With those cryptic words, the man pressed the stud of the beamer. Lund gasped, as a giant hand closed around his heart, then collapsed to the ground in a strange dying parody of slow motion. Just before the clouds of eternity shut away his vision, he at last recognized the man.

Himself!

II

JOHN REILLY was tired, intensely tired, beyond any feeling of exhaustion he had ever known.

The clock in his desk chimed once. He sighed and picked up his lecture notes, stuffing them into a scarred and battered case that he had been carrying since his student days at the Academy. He cast one weary glance around the cluttered office, then steeled himself into a passable imitation of military carriage as he left for the lecture hall.

The Cadet Sergeant-Major outside his door leaped to attention only a little less quickly than his regular service counterpart. Reilly returned their salutes and fell in behind them.

The lecture hall — gymnasi-

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um, really; the Academy was perenially overcrowded — was crowded, as usual. The eager young cadets filled the fifty rows of backless benches, while the overflow squatted and stood at the rear until it was impossible for a midget to find room to thread his way through the crowd. Reilly's class was well-tended for its honest popularity, not just because it was compulsory. There were many "compulsory" lectures in the curriculum that counted themselves proud to find half their audience in attendance.

Reilly stopped in the wings of the stage, listening for a moment to the comfortable discordances of the student band tuning their instruments. The regular service non-com peered through the hangings, catching the bandmaster's eye. The tuning stopped, and the band swung into a medley of old Academy drinking songs. Reilly smiled, as he remembered happier days when he had participated lustily in the drinking that went along with such music.

From the drinking songs, the band struck up the National Anthem. The noise the cadets made in rising nearly drowned out the music. After the last strains had been permitted to fade away, the bandmaster raised his baton once more and the opening bars of *Hail to the Chief!* filled the hall. The Sergeants-Major stepped out onto the stage, Reilly following, case clasped loosely between elbow and side.

They passed in front of the half-dozen visitors and moved to either side of the podium, turning until they were facing each other, the regular service man on the right. They snapped into a salute, followed by the entire audience. Reilly lay his case on the podium, turned and bowed to the visitors, then faced the audience again and returned the salute.

Immediately two thousand arms dropped to their owners' sides and the cadets resumed their seats.

Reilly unzipped his case and drew out his notes.

He arranged them carefully on the podium, although he knew that at no time during the next hour would he so much as glance at them again. The case stowed away under the podium, he took a deep breath and placed his hands flat on the podium's surface. Technicians in the control booth over the far end of the hall trained parabolic mikes on his lips, waiting for him to begin the lecture as he had begun hundreds of other preceding lectures, before audiences much like this. The faces might change; the uniforms were the same, and so were the underlying feelings of the

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wearers of the uniforms, year in and year out.

"The greater good for the greater number!"

The cadets let out a mutual sigh, none aware that breath had been held.

"A motto, gentlemen: merely a motto. Like *Ad Astra per Aspera, E Pluribus Unum* or *Through These Portals Pass the Most Wonderful Customers in the Galaxy.*" An appreciative titter ran through the audience.

"But what is a motto?" continued Reilly, warming to his subject, overly familiar though it was. "It's more than just a snappy way of stringing words together. It has a meaning. Often the meaning, such as in the commercial example I just gave, is on the frivolous side. But more often there is something intently serious behind a motto. *Ad Astra* — 'To the Stars.' For centuries this has been almost a religion for men, as our ancestors broke the bonds of a single planet and spread out into the galaxy. Libraries have been written of the heartbreaks and joys, the sorrows and jubilations that have been found in the far reaches of space.

"*E Pluribus Unum* — 'United We Stand.' Even older and, if possible, dearer to the hearts of men. Our very government is based on the essential concept contained in these three words from the past.

"'The greater good for the greater number'. If government runs on one motto, then civilization is based on this!"

TEAM B was dead on its feet when the copter finally returned to Base with the first rosy glow of dawn lightening the horizon. They stumbled to the ground, as sorry a looking group as Luke Royceton had ever seen. Their masquerade of grime and war paints was nearly obscured by an honest layer of general dirt. They filed into wardrobe and stripped off their clothes, leaving them in ragged piles on the floor. Then they hit the showers, luxuriating under the needle sprays and the caress of soap sliding over their skin.

The discarded costumes were gone when they emerged, feeling closer to human, twenty minutes later. In place of the animal hides were shorts, doublets and the calf-length boots of Base-centered personnel.

All were more than happy to be back in uniform.

Luke stopped outside wardrobe for a moment, then started towards Headquarters, a building distinguished from the dozen other prefabs of Base only by the pennant flying from the peak. The buildings were arranged in

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an irregular circle around the copter field, nestled in the most hidden valley of the planet's single range of hills high enough to be graced with the name of mountains. The highest peak in the range, visible over the one directly behind Headquarters, toward barely a thousand feet.

On a world less primitive, the range would never have served its present duty.

The world *was* primitive, however. Man had advanced but a few faltering steps beyond the level of the cave. Ecology had estimated the native human population not to exceed three million people over the entire globe, and cheerfully admitted that their estimate was made with every benefit of doubt given to the natives. Quite possibly not even half that number roamed the vast plains of the temperate zones, or breeded in the opulence of the equatorial jungles. As yet, population pressures had not driven men into the colder climes of the north and south. None had been spotted more than five hundred miles from the equator.

Luke checked in with the Orderly Room before reporting on to the debriefing room. He slumped onto a couch and propped his feet on a low coffee table. The other four team commanders were there ahead of him. One brought him a cup of coffee. He accepted it with thanks, and inhaled the bitter smell of the brew before draining half of it. The fiery liquid burned into his stomach and scorched away some of the tensions built up during the night.

"Rough night, Luke?" asked Andy Singer, sitting next to him.

"The roughest. We hit seventeen villages between sunset and sunrise."

"That is a load. My team only hit seven. But you were working the big river stretch, weren't you?" Luke nodded, as he sipped again at his coffee. "I thought so. We were lucky. We had the west plains. There isn't too much water over there, couple little creeks and a few holes. These locals don't stray too far from water."

"WE hit half a dozen good-sized places," said Luke. "One of them must have had thirty-five families. For a minute, I thought we were going to have to kill a few of them, but it ended up okay. Nobody hurt, except for one of my boys who stayed a second too long in a hut." He chuckled. "Got the seat of his pants burned off — a new kid, just out from the Academy. The rest of the night, he was the fastest man I had."

"Proves what I said about

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water. Biggest place I hit had seven houses, and most of them only had two or three."

Luke started to say something more, but just then the door opened and the Base Commandant came in. The Team commanders stood up respectfully, but none had the energy to properly snap to attention. He smiled as he mounted the low platform to the front of the room.

"At ease, gentlemen." Gratefully, the commanders sat back down and resumed their earlier positions of comfort. The Commandant poured himself a glass of water from a ready pitcher and drank it, then gave his full attention to the room.

"First, gentlemen, let me congratulate you on a successful night's operation. I congratulate all of you, but particularly Commander Royceton and Team B. They rolled up the enviable total of seventeen villages destroyed."

Luke flushed, feeling like a fresh-out-of-Academy Cadet as the others raised their coffee cups in his direction.

"None of you spent the evening slacking, of course," continued the Commandant. He was a middle-aged man; the empty sleeve pinned to his shoulder told why he had been booted out of field duty while men twenty years his senior were still leading teams. "Total score for the night: fifty-seven villages. Commander Royceton merely had more fertile area to work in. As we move out from the Base I know you will all have equal opportunities to prove your prowess with the torch." An appreciative murmur ran through the little group.

"Now I know you're all tired, gentlemen, and anxious to hit the sack. I won't keep you much longer. I just want to emphasize the importance of our mission on this world. Many of your men don't like making these raids on the natives. They would rather be roaming the far starlanes, putting down pirates and other glorious deeds of derring-do. But you men are not cadets; there isn't a one of you without twenty years field service time. You know the real glory comes from satisfaction in a job well done. It is up to you to transfer that feeling of satisfaction to the malcontents within your ranks. Tonight you go out again; and you will continue to do so until every single village on this planet has been razed to the ground! If so much as one single village is permitted to escape, then we have failed. I do not like failure; you do not like failure. Working together, we can see to it that failure as a word disappears from the language. I thank you, gentlemen. Dismissed." He stepped down and strode rapidly from the

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room. Behind him the audience rose and burst into talk.

III

SAM CARTER moaned silently. He tried for the hundredth time since the journey began to shift his legs into a position where the insides would not be rubbed raw by the rough hair of his horse-like mount. He resolved for the dozenth time that one of the "inventions" he would import from the southern provinces would be a good, comfortable saddle.

Another would be silk; the rough fabrics worn by Kahl's subjects were a fair substitute for the mount's hide.

"Ho, southerner!" Prince Kahl wheeled his mount back from the head of the column and waited until Sam had caught up, then he fell in beside him. "How goes it? Does my second favorite mount suit you well?"

"Very well indeed, graciousness," said Sam. "I cannot in honesty recall when I've had a more—*ouch!*—instructive ride!"

"Good!" Kahl leaned over and slapped him on the shoulder. "You'll be glad to know we've but three more hours to go before reaching the summer palaces."

"Only, uh, three more hours?" The sinking sensation in Sam's stomach had nothing at all to do with the undulating motion of his beast. "Ah, that is good news, your graciousness. We'll be there almost before we know it."

Sam wished Kahl would go away and leave him to his misery, but the prince seemed disposed to talk. "I think there will be many surprised faces in my father's court tonight. Eh, southerner?" He chuckled, and then burst into raucous laughter as he considered the idea further. "And to think, it will all be perfectly legal! You have the papers safe, my friend?"

"Yes, your graciousness," said Sam, sighing and patting his saddlebags.

"Good! Don't lose them—I'd hate to see you missing your head!" He laughed again, while Sam's stomach turned several more flipflops. "The sight of blood always did make me sick."

There were sixteen men in the mounted party, including a dozen of Kahl's private guard, the captain of the troop and the High Priest of the Sun God, the nation's officially sponsored religion. The High Priest was a little old man, bent over more from age than from the discomforts of the journey. Originally Sam had planned for one more member, but that had become unnecessary when he learned that the High Priest was also President of the Royal College

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of Chirurgeons. The latter role was even more important to his plans than the former. Now all that worried Sam was the possibility that the priest might not live to the end of the journey. He was inflicted witth a hacking cough that sent chills racing up and down Sam's spine every time he went into a fit.

Kahl grew weary of bantering small talk with a man really fit to come up with witty replies. He wheeled his horse again and dropped back to the end of the column for a moment, saying something to the High Priest, then he spurred his mount back to the head of the line, falling into his original position beside the Captain of the Guard. The two men were soon lost in reminiscences that had bored Sam to tears, every time he had been an unwilling audience.

ANOTHER hour passed miserably, while the sun mounted to the zenith and began the long summer afternoon drop back down to the horizon. The members of the Guard and Kahl pulled short stubby loaves of bread and cheese from their saddle bags and munched as they road on, washing the food down with vigorous pulls at the wineskins that took the place of water canteens on the planet. Sam had first thought the constant imbibing of alcohol to be a national vice. Then he ran tests on half a dozen waterholes. Thereafter he drank wine himself.

Now, however, he was completely without an appetite. Looking back over his shoulder, he saw that the priest was in the same boat. Suddenly, without knowing why, he pulled his mount up and waited until the priest caught up with him, then fell in at the end of the column.

"How goes it, Reverence?"

The priest looked up, watery eyes registering surprise at his company. "Oh, southerner." He broke into one of his coughing spasms. "Ahhh, not well, southerner. Not well at all. The Sun God does not ride with me this day—not that he's deserted me, you understand: he never rides with me. The Sun God has more sense than a foolish old man who should be staying home in the comfort of his apartments, not galivanting around the countryside like a frisky kitten."

"I wish he had imparted some of his wisdom to me," said Sam. "I confess I feel as you look, Reverence. No disrespect intended, believe me. It's just that the ardors of this journey have taken much toll from both of us. And I swear, by the Sun God himself, you are bearing up much better than I."

"A man who has traveled as

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long and as far as you talking this, southerner?"

"It's the way you travel, Reverence. The greatest part of my journey was by ship." It had been; Sam merely neglected to specify that it was a spaceship. "Ocean travel has its own peculiar discomforts, but for myself, I'll take it every time."

"Tell me, southerner," said the priest, "why do you make this trip?"

"Prince Kahl wished it," he replied.

"Ah, but there is more to this than lies on the surface. Why should Kahl bring you, a stranger and a subject of another house, along on a venture that may well 'cast the future course of events for this entire nation?"

"Prince Kahl seems to feel that, ah, I might, because of my experiences in other lands, serve him in some minor capacity of usefulness." Sam chose his words with care. The old man was entirely too observant for his liking.

"Kahl is an astute man," said the priest. "However, he is also a hungry man, and such a man on the verge of starvation will eat things that in more normal circumstances he would pass up without so much as a first look. Ideas are much like food, southerner."

"The philosophers of my country have a saying, Reverence. 'Man does not live by bread alone.' "

"Much wisdom is afloat in the world, disguised in strange ways." With that, the priest went into another coughing spell, after which he refused to pick up the threads of the conversation. Carter gave up, and spurred his mount back to his original place in the column.

THE rest of the trip passed in, for Sam, self-commiseration. The lower the sun sank, the hotter the temperature seemed to climb. Several times he found himself with wineskin raised to lips. The native beverage was little stronger than the plain water he would have preferred, but even so he found himself more than a little tipsy by the time they crested a low range of hills and saw the summer palaces nestled by the side of a lake in the valley below.

The column dismounted in an inner courtyard, and Kahl, Carter and the High Priest strode past the protesting chamberlain into the King's private apartments. The King was lying on a couch, eating fruits served by a manservant and listening to poetry being read to him. He looked up when the trio came in.

"My son! This is indeed an unexpected honor. What brings you from the city on a day so hot

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as this one?" He smiled, but his eyes were sharp.

"Greetings, Father," said Kahl, bowing low. "I bring you important news from the Council of Priests. Reverence!"

"Your Most Graciousness." The old man was already nearly doubled over. When he bowed, Sam half expected to hear his forehead crack the tiles of the floor.

"Well, Reverence?" The king accepted another fruit and sucked on it, keeping a watchful eye on his son. *He suspects something!* Sam thought.

The High Priest produced a scroll from his robes and ceremoniously broke the seal. Unrolled, it was short for the dynamite it contained.

"Your Most Gracious Person," he read. "The Council of Priests, meet and determined in the Holy Temple of the Sun God this fifth day of the seventh moon of the fifty-first year of the reign of Obar, King, announce to all and sundry within the domains of Obar, King, that he has incurred the wrath and displeasure of the Holy God, the Sun God, and henceforth from this day shall be no more be known as Obar, King, but as father of Kahl, King."

He let the scroll snap back into its cylinder, bowed again, then handed the scroll to Obar. "Your graciousness." Then he turned to Kahl. "Your Most Graciousness." One final return to Obar. "One more message from the Council, your graciousness. They hope you will accept their eternal pleasure and gratitude for the excellence of your reign."

ALL during the reading, Obar had been staring at the High Priest, a ghost smile half-crinkling the corners of his mouth. The half-eaten fruit now fell to the pavement with a sodden *plop!* He licked his lips.

"This . . . This is some sort of a joke?"

"No joke, Father," said Kahl, a little too heartily for Sam's liking.

"But how?" Obar shook his head. "How dare you?"

"I'm merely exercising my duty to our subjects, Father. You've grown old. You're no longer capable of carrying out the duties of king."

"No." He refused to believe. "You . . . you have no right. *I* am king! How can you . . . How can you just walk in here and tell me that I'm not? What gives you this right?"

"The same source that made you king in the first place," said Kahl. "The Sun God."

"Nonsense! There is no Sun God!"

The High Priest gasped and

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covered his eyes. *"Blasphemy!"*

"Guards!" Obar pried himself up. *"Guards!* Arrest these maniacs!"

Feet clumped outside, then turned into the chamber. Sam relaxed, unaware that he had been holding his breath, knowing that his plans were going through after all. The men who came in were the same who had escorted them from the city, Kahl's own private guards.

The captain turned to Kahl and bowed low. "You called, Your Most Graciousness?"

"Yes. Take this blithering idiot away."

The captain bowed again, and gestured. Two of his men grabbed the former king by the arms and carried him away, screaming.

"Ho, southerner!" Kahl sat down on his father's couch and gestured. The manservants had been cowering in the background; they came forward now and touched their foreheads to the ground. Kahl took a fruit and bit into it, letting the juice trickle down his chin.

"It worked," said Kahl, swallowing. "By the Sun God, it worked!" He slapped his knee. "I confess, southerner, when first I heard your plans, I thought you daft indeed. But it worked! I'm king!"

"I felt certain it would," said Sam, carefully omitting the title of respect. It passed unnoticed. More sure of himself, he continued, "After all, the idea was inherent in the very structure and strictures of your government. Your divine position comes from the Sun God. He should be able to remove it as easily as he grants it."

"True," said Kahl. "Howsomever, there shall be some changes made in that respect, once I have consolidated my position. Oh, I delude myself not in thinking that the battle is over, my friend. But the hardest part has been won."

"I've been thinking," said Sam, slowly.

"Well, keep it not to yourself!" said Kahl. "If any more of your ideas prove as useful to me as the last, then you have a glorious future indeed."

"My thoughts are, I'm afraid, roaming rather far afield. But take them for what they might be worth. You are king of this nation now, Kahl; and a very able king you shall be. Why limit the benefits of your rule to this one nation? Why not let the rest of the world know the joys of your rule?"

"Ummm?" He squinted, one eye closed. "You think it might work out?"

"Why not?" *And the Sun God help us all!* he added to himself.

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IV

THE chambers were crowded as the delegates, alternates and just plain onlookers poured in for the afternoon session of the Central Worlds Conference. Two hours before the meeting was due to begin, an astute member of the press, long used to such functions, observed that there would undoubtedly be a record broken before the day was over. And it was easy to see why: all eyes were trained on the spot low in the tiers with the Ehrlan pennant floating overhead.

As yet, the central figure of all the interest had not arrived, although the rest of the Ehrlans were already in their seats and looking anxiously up the aisles towards the bank of elevators. An elevator would open from time to time, to disgorge a few late arrivals. But the man they expected was not yet among them. Below, on the chamber floor, the presiding secretary was mounting to the rostum and arranging his papers.

"Where the devil can he be!" said Citizen Evrett to Citizen Sterm, the second ranking member of the delegation.

"God only knows! You don't suppose something has . . . happened?"

"How could it, here in the heart of the city? He only had to come one block from the hotel. You've been watching too many thrillers, Citizen—I hope!"

"Well, we have to do *something*. The session will be starting in a few minutes. If he isn't here, someone else will have to make the presentation."

"Who?"

"I don't know. How about you, Citizen?"

"Now, wait a minute!" said Evrett. "What's the matter with you, Citizen? You're the logical choice. You rank second in the group."

"I wouldn't dare," admitted Sterm. "What if I should bobble things? I'd never be able to live it down. I wouldn't even dare go home. My wife is Lund's half-sister, you know."

"I'd forgotten. But somebody has to do it, if he doesn't get here. This is the only opportunity we'll have this decade. If we have to wait another ten years, we may as well forget the matter altogether."

"We can't do that!" protested Sterm. "We've worked too long and too hard on this plan. It's the only fair solution anyway. The other worlds will never accept anything else."

"Some of them may not want to accept this one, when they hear all of the details. You must admit, we haven't been too easy on some of your fellow members.

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They . . . Here comes Arko. Maybe he found out something."

A junior member of the delegation came panting down the aisle, shaking his head when he saw the others' eyes on him. "Sorry, Citizens," he said, as soon as he was within the Ehrlan area. "He left the hotel over an hour ago. No one has seen a sign of him since."

"Well, that tears it," said Evrett, just as the presiding secretary struck his gavel on the little wooden block, announcing the opening of the session. "Who has the copy of the plans?"

"Here," said Sterm, digging the papers from his case.

"I'll make the presentation myself . . ."

"Just a minute, Citizen!" said Arko. "Look! Here he comes now!"

They all turned and looked at the pudgy figure ambling slowly down the aisle, nodding to greetings that came from all sides. The missing man smiled and shook hands with a couple of the onlookers, before entering the area and taking his seat at the head of the delegation.

"Citizen Lund!" cried Sterm, as though speaking to a wayward child. "Where in the name of the Seven Suns have you been?"

"Why, it's a beautiful day, Citizens," explained Lund. "I thought I'd take a stroll in the Park. There's quite a large Ehrlan section, you know. Makes one quite homesick to hear the singing flowers serenading the passerby. I can't wait to get back home again."

"If you hadn't shown up, none of use would have had the nerve to go home!"

"Why, Citizen Sterm!" Lund seemed amused by some private joke. "Whatever made you think I wouldn't be here? This is an important day for Ehrla, remember?"

"How could we forget?" said Evrett.

The presiding secretary fiddled with his bank of microphones for a moment, in the manner of presiding secretaries throughout history since the invention of the public address system, then turned hopelessly to the technicians. A man came forward, made a simple adjustment, then retreated. The Secretary cleared his throat, sipped at a glass of water and spoke.

"The fourth session of the Nineteenth Conference of the Central Worlds is open for business. The afternoon session will be devoted to the presentation and discussion of proposals by the membership. The Recording Secretary will call the roll of delegations."

A short stubby man with five

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o'clock shadow came forward and leaned into the bank of microphones, and yelled: "Accryllia!"

Across the chamber a man stood up, holding his delegation's microphone. "The grand and sovereign system of Accryllia, long known throughout the galaxy for the excellence of its citrus fruit, the beauty of its maidens, the virtue of its honorable young men . . . the grand and sovereign state of Accryllia passes."

"Antares!"

"Antares passes."

"Bodancer!"

"The system of Bodancer passes."

"Buddington!"

"Mr. Secretary, the proud system of Buddington yields to Ehrla!"

"Ehrla!"

CITIZEN Lund stood up, unclipped the mike from the railing, smiled around at a few more wellwishers and launched into his speech. "Mr. Secretary! Ehrla wishes to thank the proud and ancient system of Buddington for relinquishing its rightful order in these proceedings, so that Ehrla may present a plan that the citizens of Ehrla feel certain will meet with the full approval of this meeting.

"For hundreds of years, the various peoples represented here today have been rightly concerned with the problems of new star systems being developed, new races being assimilated into the federation of free and lawful worlds. These new worlds need guidance, a guidance that only long experience can provide."

Evrett looked at Sterm, uneasily. "What is this?" he whispered. "He isn't presenting the plan like this, I hope? He'll alienate half the delegations."

"I don't know what he's doing," said Sterm. "I only hope *he* knows."

"In the past," continued Lund, "the various and varied members of this honored organization have provided the same guidance in wise and infinitely proper manner. It is the hope of Ehrla that they will continue to do so in the future. Therefore the ancient and honorable system of Ehrla proposes, to this effect, that the members of this organization continue as they have in the past."

Pandemonium was breaking out in scattered sections of the chamber as various delegations realized that they were being snookered by the Ehrlans. Voices rose up here and there, trying to drown out Lund's words. Monitors moved up and down the aisles, trying to quell the disturbances.

"Therefore," said Lund, "Ehrla, to the implementation of its plan,

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announces to this organization that this day they have annexed the systems of Phelimina, Trepidar and Scolatia."

He sat down and turned to the rest of his delegation. "Gentlemen," he said, smiling, as he handed a sealed envelope to Sterm, "my resignation."

REILLY slumped in his chair with a sigh. The lecture had gone well, but it had ended not a moment too soon to suit him.

"I'm growing old," he said, unaware he was speaking out loud.

"Pardon, sir?" The regular service Sergeant-Major closed the door and brought over his cup of coffee. "Did you say something, sir?"

"What?" Reilly blinked. "Oh, nothing. Nothing at all, Sergeant. Just an old man muttering to himself."

"Begging the general's pardon, sir, I don't think you're an old man at all. At least, no older than myself." He cocked his head. "Although, to be perfectly honest with both of us, sir, there are times when I just can't seem to keep up with these children they keep sending us nowadays."

"We're both ready for retirement, Sergeant. Old work horses, ready to be turned out to pasture. I guess this will be the last class I see through these old doors. I've submitted my resignation, you know." Reilly moodily regarded his coffee.

"Yessir, I knew. The rest of the faculty knows too. And if I might be so bold as to say so, sir, we'll all be sorry to see you go. It won't be the same Academy without General Reilly glarin' a bit at us all."

"Glaring a bit, is it, Sergeant?" He glared now, then broke down into a smile. "I suppose I do at that. Do the cadets still call me Old Stoneface?"

"Not within my hearing, sir." He grinned. "But you know cadets. You were one yourself. I supose it'd be as difficult to stop cadets from tagging their teachers with nicknames as it'd be to ride a star bareback."

Reilly sighed, and swiveled his chair until he could see through the one cluttered window. The parade ground stretched away beneath, the system pennant fluttered briskly in the stiff breeze. Into his view marched a battalion of Cadets. Much the same scene had repeated itself daily during the thirty years he had occupied the office. "The faces change."

"Sir?"

"The faces change, Sergeant. How many thousands of boys have come through these doors? The uniform never changes, though. And I suppose that's really the most important thing,

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in its essence — the uniform and the tradition."

"That it is, sir."

Reilly chuckled. "You know, Sergeant, I never considered myself a particularly sentimental man. Still, the faster the years fly by, the dearer old memories become. The clearer, too. I can recall things that happened when I was a boy much easier than I can remember what I had for breakfast this morning. And I know that's a sign of old age."

He picked up his coffee and made a face when he found it cold. "Sergeant, as two old men sharing the past, how about having a cup of something a bit stronger than this watery brew with me?"

"Sir! I really don't think . . ."

"Oh, bother regulations, Sergeant! I'm speaking as a man now, not as a general. I'd deem it an honor."

"Then I'd be proud to, sir."

HE sat down in the visitor's chair while Reilly opened the bottom drawer of his desk and drew out a bottle and two very dusty glasses. He blew into them, set them on the edge of the desk and poured generous measures of the amber liquid. The sergeant accepted his with a bow of his head. They raised their glasses.

"To yesterday, Sergeant."

"To yesterday, sir. And may these days be as memorable to those who will be remembering fifty years from now."

"And those days fifty years further." They touched glasses, then tossed off the contents, wincing as the whiskey cut its way down. A soft ball of fire exploded in Reilly's midsection. He sighed, capped the bottle and stowed it and the glasses away.

A short rat-a-tat-tat sounded on the door; the Cadet Sergeant-Major opened it and stuck his head through. "Sir?"

"Yes, Sergeant?"

"Six gentlemen to see you, sir."

"What?" He glanced at his memo pad. A notation warned him six prospective cadets were due to come in. It was not standard procedure for him to interview candidates, but all six were the sons of Academy graduates killed in the line of duty. "Give me five minutes, Sergeant, then show them in."

"Very good, sir." He withdrew and closed the door.

"Well, Sergeant," said Reilly, turning to the regular service man. "Perhaps these are the lads who will be doing that reminiscing fifty years from now."

"Quite possible, sir." He stood up and came to attention. "Do I have the general's permission, sir?"

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"Dismissed, Sergeant."

Sighing, Reilly swiveled his chair again and watched the drillers on the parade ground until the short rat-a-tat-tat sounded again. He turned around in time to face the gangling teenagers trooping through the door.

"Messrs. Whyte, Phillips, Garrett, Gordon, Kaslov and Poirot, sir," announced the Cadet Sergeant-Major before withdrawing again.

"Come in, gentlemen, come in." Reilly stood up. "Find yourselves a seat. Just pile those magazines on the chair, sir. I think three of you will fit admirably on that couch. You others can draw up those chairs by the water cooler. Yes, that's it." He shook hands all around, and then sat down again.

"Now then, your names once more, please?" He fixed them firmly in his mind as each boy introduced himself in turn. "Ah, yes. And I, of course, am General Reilly, Commandant of the Academy."

"Sir?"

"Yes, Mr. Kaslov?"

"Would that be *the* General Reilly? Of the Deneb Crisis?"

"I see my fame has proceeded me, gentlemen. Yes, I am that Reilly. Please, don't let the fact scare you. I assure you, I don't bite off the head of a boy until he is in uniform. Then, gentlemen, you are fair game from then on.

"Now, then," he said. "Are there many other questions before I give you my sales pitch? Yes, Mr. Kaslov?"

"Sir," the boy said, hesitantly, "I believe you knew my grandfather. Sub-Colonel Kaslov? He served with you during the Deneb Crisis."

"Of course!" said Reilly. "Martin Kaslov; I should have recognized the name immediately. He was my Team leader. And his son was fresh out of the Academy; I remember very well. So you might become third generation Academy material, eh? Good, good. We're always glad to have someone whose roots are deep in Academy tradition. That's why I'm particularly happy to have all six of you gentlemen here this afternoon. I understand you attended my lecture?"

ALL six nodded; one raised his hand.

"Yes, Mr. Whyte?"

"Sir, I heard your lecture, but, frankly, I didn't get very much out of it. I mean, you talked a great deal about the service and so forth, but it just didn't make much sense to me. It was just like Pop — my dad used to talk when I was a kid. I don't suppose it made much sense then, but kids don't under-

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stand anyway. But now I'm old enough to enter the Academy myself. I think I should know more about it, what it means, what it stands for. Uh, do I make myself clear?"

"As lucid as a mountain spring on a bright morning, Mr. Whyte. I only regret my own words were not as concise." He smiled. The other boys laughed while Whyte flushed.

"But you have expressed a very important point," continued Reilly. "I don't want a man coming in here who doesn't know what the Academy stands for. We have a long tradition, but we mean more than just words carved over a marble arch. 'The Greater Good for the Greater Number.' There are hundreds of years and hundreds of thousands of lives lived and died behind those seven words. From Earth's first colony in the Centauri system to the latest native intelligence charted in the Crab Nebula, those seven words have wrapped up an entire philosophy and dictated the means of living by it.

"But what do the words actually mean? I think, Mr. Whyte, that is the crux of your question. Indeed, that is the crux of the structure on which the Academy is founded. Oh, it's easy to say that the words mean what they say, because they do. That and no more. But how to explain them so that someone who doesn't *know* will know? In a sense, I've been trying to do that ever since my first girl friend threw me over as an incurable romantic when she learned that I intended to enter the Academy. For many people, I'm afraid there is no explanation. They are incapable of understanding, no matter how hard we try. But I don't think you gentlemen are in that class. Otherwise you would not be here at all.

"The obvious place to begin is the beginning. 'The greater good.' Not the greatest, mind you—the greater. There are those who quibble over words; they are responsible for this particular delineation. It would be idealistic to try for the greatest in all things. Despite his thousands of years of development, man is still a long ways from being an ideal creature. There are certain things that remain beyond his capabilities. In certain isolated incidents, the course we follow does produce the greatest good possible. But they are isolated.

"The same reasoning follows the choice of 'The Greater Number.' Only our limitations prevent us from seeing to it that every world in the galaxy is the best of all possible worlds, insofar as the peculiarities of a particular world permit. We do our best, and take

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pride in the fact that that best is better than anyone else's.

"But so much for numerical values. You most want to hear what we *do*. And that can best be summed up in one word: everything, Everything, and yet that, too, has its limitations. Impossibilities are beyond even us. Improbabilities are given a fair chance. We are constantly seeking out courses of action that will benefit not the individual but the race. And in some instances, not even a race, when there are many races involved in a particular manner. The methods we follow, the actions we take in a particular instance, may sometimes seem cruel and unreasoning . . . "

V

THE families were on the move, away from their comfortable homes under the everlasting warmth of the sun. Luke Royceton shifted his weight in the copter and trained the glasses on a column of dust rising three miles to the west and ten thousand feet below.

"It's okay, Harry," he said to the pilot. "They've swung back north again."

"Right, Luke," the pilot replied. "Scout report just in says there's a real big outfit about eighty miles settling down around a lake. Shall we hit them?"

"We the closest?"

"Singer's forty miles the other side of them, but he's tied up chasing some mavericks."

"Let's go then."

Luke holstered his glasses and slid down into the cargo hold. The rest of the team were taking advantage of the lull in activity to catch up on their relaxation. They had been constantly on the go since the migrations had begun in earnest two months earlier. Luke kibitzed a card game for a few minutes, then announced: "Action coming up in about twenty minutes. Grab something to eat and run a check on your costumes."

The copter dropped to treetop level five miles from the lake and came to ground four miles further on. The team piled out, stretched the tensions of the long ride out of their bodies, then started out through head-high dwarf trees that separated their landing spot from the lake. They wound through the trees and over a low, rolling series of hills. The cover stopped suddenly, two hundred yards from the beach.

"Big family is right!" said Luke softly, gripping his axe.

There were nearly fifty huts in various stages of construction along the beach. Twice that number of adult males were working

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on them, while the women were bringing in armloads of grass for thatching. The children were waist-deep in the lake with fishing spears. A still wriggling pile on the beach testified to their prowess.

Luke glanced over the dozen members of his team, shaking his head. "I don't know," he said. "Those are pretty hefty odds."

"What's to worry about, Luke?" asked one of the men. "You don't expect those characters to put up a fight, do you?"

"God only knows. They just might take it in their heads to do that. From looks of things, either this outfit has been traveling far or else several villages have combined forces. If it's the last, then I'm plenty worried."

"So what do we do? Go back and yell for reinforcements?"

"Not yet. Not until we try these babies ourselves. Everybody got his courage screwed up?" There were soft murmurs of assent from each man. "Make torches." Two men faded away and returned a moment later with arms full of the same grass the villagers were using. Half the team set to work, twisting them into torches and tying them with short lengths of a twine-like vine they had brought along from the equatorial jungles. The torches were passed out, and Luke took a deep breath: "Let's go!"

THE team leaped to their feet and broke from the cover, screaming their banshee cry. The natives dropped what they were doing and wheeled around, then froze in their tracks at the sight of the wildly painted devils tearing down the beach. The two hundred yards separating them halved, then halved again before the natives broke out of their stupor. One of the workers placed his fingers between his teeth and whistled. The children ran in from the lake, tossing their spears to the nearest adult, man or woman.

By the time the team was among them, axes whistling through the air and smashing the walls of the huts, the villagers were armed and fighting back.

"We've got troubles!" yelled Luke, bringing his axe down to break several spears being jabbed at him. The spears were too short to make good throwing weapons, so the natives were using them just as they would in going after fish. One got through Luke's guard; he choked back a cry of pain as the broad stone head went into his flesh and was twisted. He pulled away, yanking the shaft out of the native's hand.

Two of the team had managed to get close enough to the cooking fires to light their torches. They used them now as shields, until the grass burned down to

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the handles. One then tossed his into the large pile of thatching material, while the other stuck his into the unplastered wall of the nearest hut. The thatching blazed up quickly, forcing the natives away from the heat. Most of the team now had their backs to the nearest wall; none had escaped the jabbing spears. One man was completely encircled by the natives. Suddenly his axe was wrenched from his grasp. They picked him up, legs flailing wildly in the air, carried him over and threw him onto the fire.

"Let's get out of here!" screammed Luke, surprising those around him by suddenly leaping forward and grabbing two of them, forcing them off balance. He called on every ounce of strength he possessed to run through the gauntlet of spears. From the corner of his eye, he could see one other man break loose, only to be recaptured a dozen feet farther on.

By some miracle, Luke outdistanced those pursuing him, crashing into the cover. The natives followed a few yards, then gave up the chase, heading back to the easier sport on the beach.

Luke tripped over an exposed root and crashed to the ground. He tried to get up again, but his injured arm refused to support him. Closing his eyes, he waited for the fatal blow to fall.

Several minutes passed, during which Luke recited every prayer he had ever heard, to every conceivable deity in the pantheon. At the end of that time, he realized that he wasn't going to die after all—at least, not here and now. Rolling over onto his good arm, he sat up and got his back against a tree. From the beach came screams of terror, growing fainter as he listened and finally dying away altogether. Bracing his good arm against a tree, he worked himself up, got himself oriented and started back towards the copter.

The pilot threw away his cigarette and dropped out of the door to the cargo hold when Luke came limping into view.

"My God, man! What happened?"

"I . . . made a mistake." He let himself be helped into the copter and took the mike, reporting the disaster on the beach to the Commandant back at Base. Then he let the pilot bandage his wounds.

"ELEVEN men dead," he said bitterly.

"Don't take it so hard, Luke," said Andy Singer. The team Commanders were back in the debriefing room again. All had commiserated with Luke on the tragedy; none had been able to convince him that it had not been his fault.

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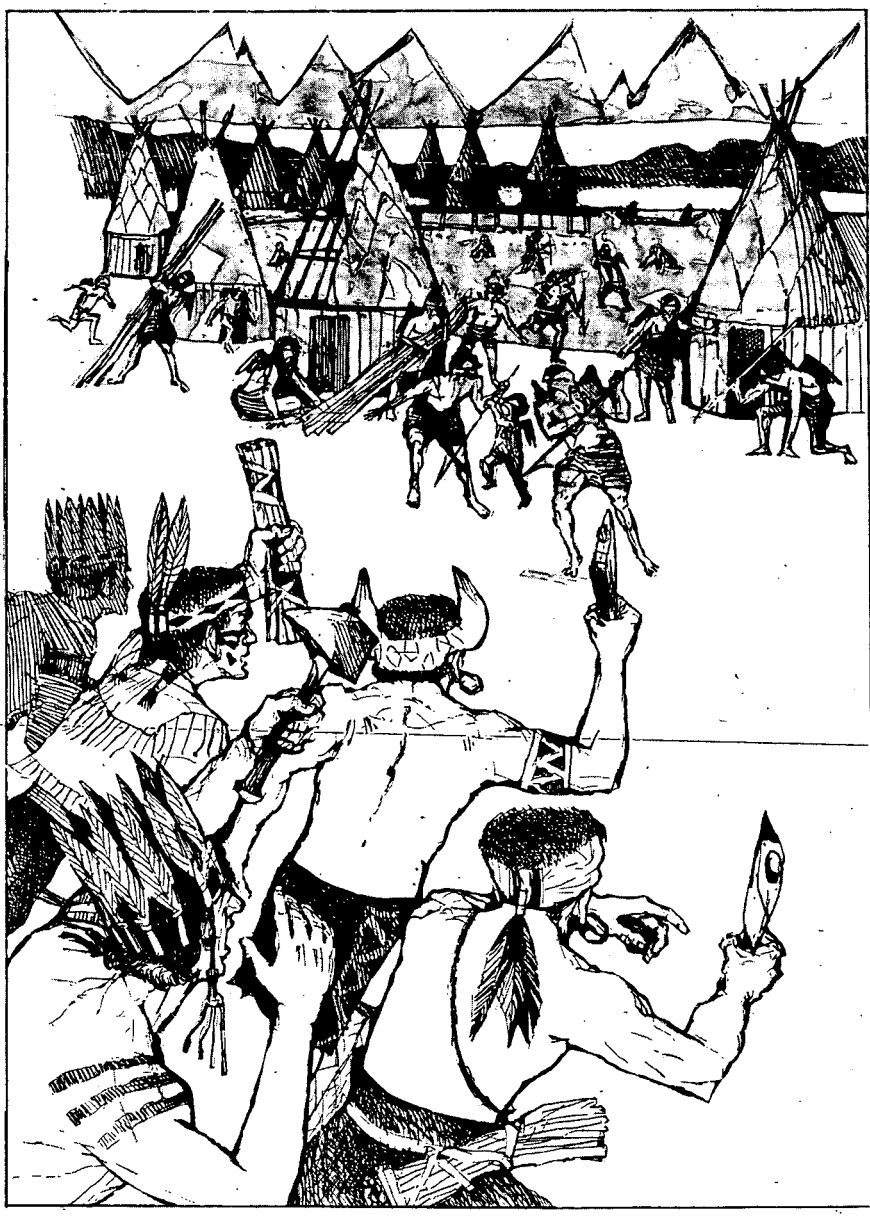

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"Eleven men dead," he repeated, no matter what they said.

The commandant came in and they rose. "At ease, gentlemen," he said, as he mounted the platform. He stared at them for a thirty-second eternity.

"Ours is not an easy task." His words broke the tension; all sighed.

"There has been a tragic accident, gentlemen. Good men have died. Men just as good have died on a thousand planets in a thousand different ways. Sometimes they died because of an error; sometimes the death was unavoidable. But for whatever reason, they did not die in vain!

"This is a young planet," he continued. "In many ways, it's as near to paradise as any of us will ever see. Man is a young race here — young in development. Yet almost before he has a chance to prove himself, he has found himself in a backwater, stymied as it were by the very paradise qualities which attract us. Life is easy here, too easy. He doesn't have to exert himself. He lives much like his ancestors did, ten thousand years ago.

"There is no future in standing still. Whether he likes it or not, man must develop, must give the future generations a chance for their place in the sun. Despite sentimentality, anything that gives them that chance is good. Therefore, I repeat: eleven men died here yesterday. *They did not die in vain!*"

"Time for a break, I think," said Reilly, pressing a button. The door opened and the cadet Sergeant-Major stuck his head in.

"Sir?"

"Coffee, Sergeant. That will be suitable, gentlemen?" The boys nodded and the cadet withdrew.

"While we're waiting, are there any more questions?"

One of the boys hesitantly raised his hand.

"Mr. Phillips?"

"Sir, why is so much of the activity by the agents carried out in secrecy? It all seems rather underhanded to me."

"By the very nature of themselves, what we do must be carried out secretly. Even when we act openly, it is in secret . . ."

IN the distance a bell tolled the supper hour. In the palace, pageboys wandered the corridors, knocking on apartment doors rousing the occupants. Carter combed out his beard, frowning at the liberal sprinkling of gray hairs in it, donned his cloak and set out for the dining hall. He shivered as a chill wind swept down the drafty corridors, and reminded himself to speak to Kahl again about returning to

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the capital city. Anything would be better than this.

The dining hall was crowded, as usual, with supplicants who had bribed their way to the royal tables. Most of them had wasted their money. The chamberlain had stuck them away in far corners where they would be able to do nothing but stare at the man they wanted to see. Not that it would have done them any good to speak to the king. Kahl found the petty details of his office tiring. More and more he had been shoving them onto the willing shoulders of Carter.

The chamberlain met him at the door with a copy of the seating arrangements. Carter read down the list, pausing here and there at familiar names—most of them pests who had long ago worn out his patience. He pursed his lips and touched a name with his finger.

"This Ivra. Fisherman, it says. He the one with the daughter Kahl wants?"

"Yes." Like most of the royal retinue, the chamberlain was uncomfortable in Carter's presence. The man had no title, no office. But he was undeniably the most powerful person in the realm after the king himself — some placed his eminence even ahead of the king's. "Shall I place him at the royal table?"

"No. It wouldn't do any good. But tell him to come see me tomorrow—no. Make that three days from now. He can't have his daughter unviolated, but I think we can make him happy to have her at all."

He handed the list back and made his way to the royal table, nodding to acquaintances and enemies. The problem of the fisherman bothered him. Carter was unaware of the fact, but he carried a strong puritanical conscience, the legacy of unknown forebears of years back. He disapproved of Kahl's unrestrained love life and did whatever he could to ease the disruptions it caused in the normal flow of subject-ruler relations.

He stopped at the royal table and clapped a uniformed officer on the shoulder. "Marshal Zants! A pleasure to see you back at court. I read your report. I know His Most Graciousness will be pleased at your eastern successes."

"Thank you, sir." The marshal inclined his head. "And I see you have had your own successes. Much has changed during the two years of my campaign."

"We all live, Marshal," said Carter. "We all grow a little older. It's the natural course of life. A man who stands still in one position all the time wouldn't make a good runner, now would he?"

"Indeed not. I suppose you

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wouldn't be interested in a commission under me? What things we could do together!"

"I'm honored that you think of me so kindly, but I'm afraid my peculiar talents don't run in the military manner, Marshal."

"Ah, but what a strategist you would make, sir."

"Oh?" He grinned. "Then our enemies should be happy to have me in the capital, not on the field."

HE reached his seat just in time to touch trousers to it and rise again when Kahl came in, whispering something in the ear of a courtesan. The girl laughed hysterically, then went to the woman's table as servants started bringing in the first course. Kahl grunted as he sat down and rubbed his belly. He leaned over towards Carter.

"I'm getting fat, southerner. Fat and old."

"A little exercise would do us all good."

Kahl laughed. "That's what I like about you, Carter. Not for you the mealy-mouthed compliments. When you think something, you come right out and say it. I wish more of my ministers had your courage."

"A few tried it," said Carter. "As I remember it, you had their ears cut off and made them eat them."

"Yes, but I gave them a choice as to how they were prepared, didn't I?" He roared, and the rest of the room roared with him, although no one more than six feet from the head of the royal table could possibly have known the jest.

Kahl fell to slurping his soup, while Carter did his best to hide his distaste at the man's table manners. For that matter, there was not a person in the hall he would have invited to the most informal dinner in his own apartments. Table manners were something else he had been trying to introduce, but as yet they were his most notorious failure.

"Ahhh!" The king wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. While one servant removed the soup and another brought up the platter of meats and fish, he leaned over again. "Now, then, Carter. I've been meaning to speak to you all day. Been busy, though. Inhuman the number of demands on my time. Not that I mind of course. The penalties of the crown, and all that. But I really have been meaning to talk to you. How's that pet tinkerer of yours coming along."

"Which one would that be? I've got most of the college working, you know."

"The one working on that steam gadget you've been telling me about. You know, the one to

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make work easier. Not that I can see why a man should have his work made easy. Does the people good to sweat a bit."

"Economically, though, to have one man able to do the work of half a dozen is very good. Just think of how it'll enrich the treasuries. Besides, the work isn't any easier on them: they just produce more."

"Yes, yes. You've explained that all before. But how is it going?"

"Quite well. I think another few weeks will bring very promising results. Some of the others are coming along well, too. The armory is turning out a hundred of the improved crossbows a day, now. I took Marshal Zants through the armory and his eyes positively glowed with excitement. He promises new and greater victories in his next campaign."

"OH?" Kahl was chewing on the leg of a bird. "He's been doing pretty good as it is, hasn't he?"

"Much better than I would have thought," Carter admitted. "The problems of waging a war completely off from contact with home are great. Lines of supply, communication — these are all vital to the successful campaign. I've got a few ideas on these subjects, too. After all, there is a limit to how much may be withdrawn from an occupied area — if you still want to have that area useful to you in the future. A very wise man in my country once said that an army travels on its stomach. The plans Zants has been discussing with me for his next campaign call for a very large army."

"You know," said Kahl, "at the rate we're going, it won't be long before your country is part of my country."

"I'm afraid that'll take a while yet." He laughed. "Although there has never been a nation in history with so much territory under its direct rule. Your name will live as the monarch of this country alone, no matter what you might do on your own."

Events were moving fast on the planet — almost faster than Carter wanted. Already the lands under Kahl's rule amounted to nearly fifty per cent of the known areas of the world. At the rate things were snowballing, it wouldn't be long before his primary objective of planetary unification were achieved — thousands of years ahead of time, if events had been permitted to follow their natural course.

Of course, there would be delays and setbacks all along the way. Subsidiary objectives would always be getting in the way, must always be considered along

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with other plans. But even so, things were off to a good start. Although he might not live to see the complete fruition of all of his plans, Carter knew that this world was well on its way towards galactic citizenship.

"There's a great deal of satisfaction in being a power behind the throne." Reilly grinned. "However, if any of you have a particular yen toward such power, it's only fair to tell you now that our screening is the most thorough ever devised. And it is constantly being improved. No man is ever placed in a position where his weaknesses might prove the better of him.

"This is not to say that a man might not find himself in a position where he will be called on to do more than his utmost. It's surprising just how much a man can do, when he finds out he has no other choice . . ."

VI

THE counterfeit Lund reached the bank of elevators a half-dozen running paces ahead of the just-coming-to-life audience. He gestured, and the operator closed the door in their faces.

During the long descent to the street, Lund stripped off his clothes and did things to his face while the operator shoved the discarded costume into an access panel. Then he gave the now-slim little man a boost up through the roof of the cage and let himself be helped up.

"Thank God for tradition," the man who had been known as Lund said when he helped the other man up. Stripping off his uniform jacket and reversing it changed the other's appearance. The elevator slowed automatically for the ground floor. Word had been flashed down from the Conference hall, but when the waiting monitors surged into the opening elevator before it had quite eased to a stop, they found nothing at all.

Overhead, the two men threaded their way through a maze of cables and onto the roof of the next cab. It dropped under them, then stopped halfway between floors while they climbed down. The new operator eyed them, but said nothing while they brushed each other off. At a signal from the small man, the cab continued its interrupted drop, letting them out on the subsurface shopping level.

The corridors of the level were full of running figures, most of them heading towards the elevator banks. No one paid the newly arrived pair any attention at all, although the powder-blue uniforms of the monitors predominated.

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The two men strode briskly down the corridor until they came to a side passage lined with small shops that featured the specialized products of the various members of the Conference. They stopped in front of one displaying gadgets from Ehrla, then entered while the counterfeit Lund purchased a perpetual razor, having it giftwrapped. Then they wandered further, acting now like the average sightseer, until they reached a florist's shop set in an alcove at the end of the passage.

They entered, saw that there were no other customers, nodded to the salesman and continued on to the back.

"Dale!" The waiting pair leaped to their feet and spoke as one. "We thought you weren't going to make it!"

"I didn't think so myself," said Dale Vernon, the slim little man. "If Dic hadn't been there right on schedule, there'd be nothing left of me but a few bloody shreds. Those people were *mad*!" His voice showed respect for the strength of their emotions. "What's the news?"

"The Park monitors found the real Lund about twenty minutes ago."

"Good timing. Any sooner, and the fun upstairs would have been different."

"And you know who is screaming for the dissolving of the Conference."

"So soon?"

"They, uh, you might say had an inside lead as to what was going to happen."

"It's a little early to tell," added the other man, "but apparently the operation was a success. The proper wheels have been set in motion, at least. We'll have to keep applying grease from time to time in the next forty-eight hours, but I think we can forget about the Ehrlan problem — during this conference, at least. Ten years from now, they'll have an entirely different set of plans for the reformation of the galaxy. And we'll have to come up with an entirely different way of crossing them."

"Do-gooders!" snorted the first man.

"You must admit, they have the best of intentions," said Vernon.

"But intentions aren't enough," added the other. "Man is an imperfect creature at best, and his best is a rare occurence indeed. We have to deal with practicalities. Perfection is beyond us, and we'd be idiots to try and enforce it. That's the basic difference between us and the Ehrlans — we know what we can and can't do. They know only what they would like to do. And that makes

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them the most dangerous force loose in the galaxy today."

"TO sum it up," said Reilly, getting up and going to the window, "ours is not a life of glory and fame." Another battalion marched out onto the field below and began the familiar maneuvers. "We work hard and receive little thanks—if, indeed, we receive any thanks at all. The life is strenuous. The work is demanding. And over all of us rides the constant specter of failure, for we are not perfect. Nor do we want to be.

"It is a lonely life for some: it is a short life for others. But for all of us, it's something more." He turned and faced the boys again. "It is the chance to be something more than just a man, for a man is a selfish creature. And it is the most rewarding life I know.

"Any questions, gentlemen?"

— ROBERT HOSKINS

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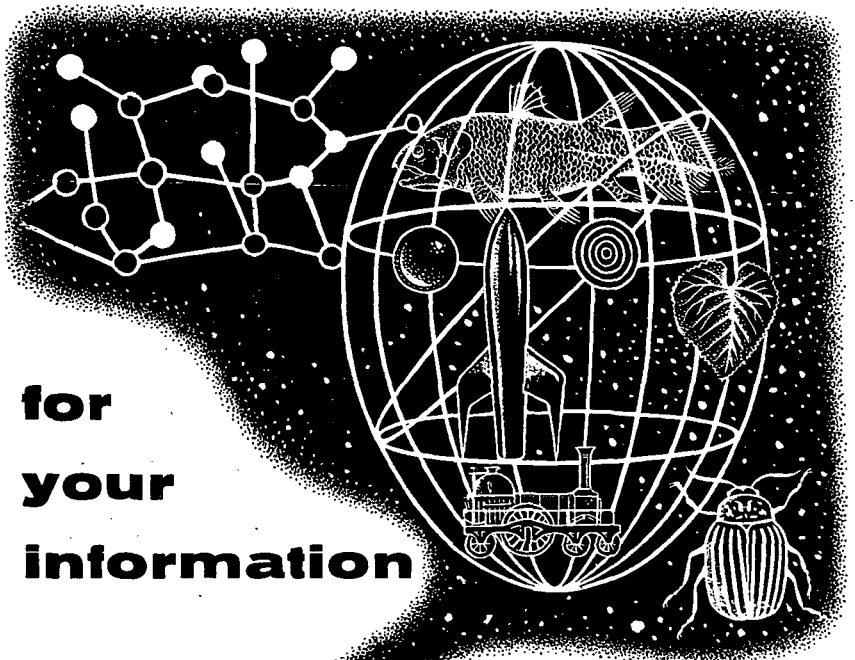

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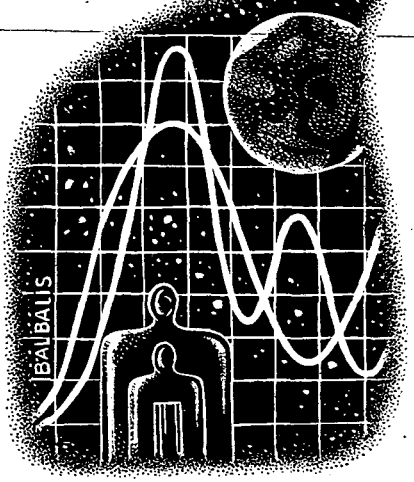
BY WILLY LEY



THE AVERAGE reader — as distinct from the science-fiction reader — has had a number of terminology problems during the past few years. His favorite newspapers and magazines, instead of talking about things one could understand like sad-eyed puppies and clean-cut little boys who, unfortunately, are too stupid to spell properly, has started talking of orbits, perigee and apogee, inclination to the equator and similar things. Quite a number of

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people are convinced that these are all brand new words, invented either in Washington or in Huntsville, Alabama. In reality they are standard astronomical terms that have been around since the early part of the seventeenth century.

But recently talk about L-points has started and though this, too, is a standard astronomical term, I suspect that not even all science-fiction readers are quite sure just what an L-point is.

To begin at the beginning, the L stands for Lagrange, full name Joseph Louis Lagrange, who lived from 1736 to 1813. Lagrange was a mathematician with strong astronomical leanings, and as his name indicates he was a Frenchman. Frenchmen have the reputation of being people who stay home, or at least in France. If this is truly a national characteristic of the French, then Lagrange was an atypical Frenchman. To begin with, he was born in Torino, or Turin, in Italy and was educated there; he also had his first position in Italy, being appointed (at the age of nineteen!) professor of mathematics at the Artillery School at Torino. While engaged in the task of hammering some mathematics into the skulls of future artillery commanders he corresponded with the mathematician Leonhard Euler and laid the foundation for the branch of mathematics which later came to be called calculus of variations.

At the age of 28 he published a mathematical treatise on the motion of the moon which was awarded a prize by the French Academy of Sciences. Two years later, he followed up with a theory of the motions of the satellites of Jupiter which made such an impression in Berlin that Frederick the Great of Prussia appointed him director of the Berlin Academy of Sciences. Lagrange spent the next twenty years of his life in Berlin until, finally, in 1787 Louis XVI of France invited him to come to Paris. There he spent the rest of his life, heading a commission for the reform of weights and measures, being professor at the *Ecole Polytechnique* and finally becoming a senator and elevated to Count by Napoleon I.

During his investigation of the orbits of our own moon, as well as the orbits of Jupiter's satellites, Lagrange encountered a problem which he did *not* solve: the so-called three-body problem.

THE PROBLEM is very simply this:

Assume three bodies in space — say a planet which has two very large moons in orbit around it. You know the mass of every one of these three bodies. You also know their relative positions, and you know their orbital veloci-

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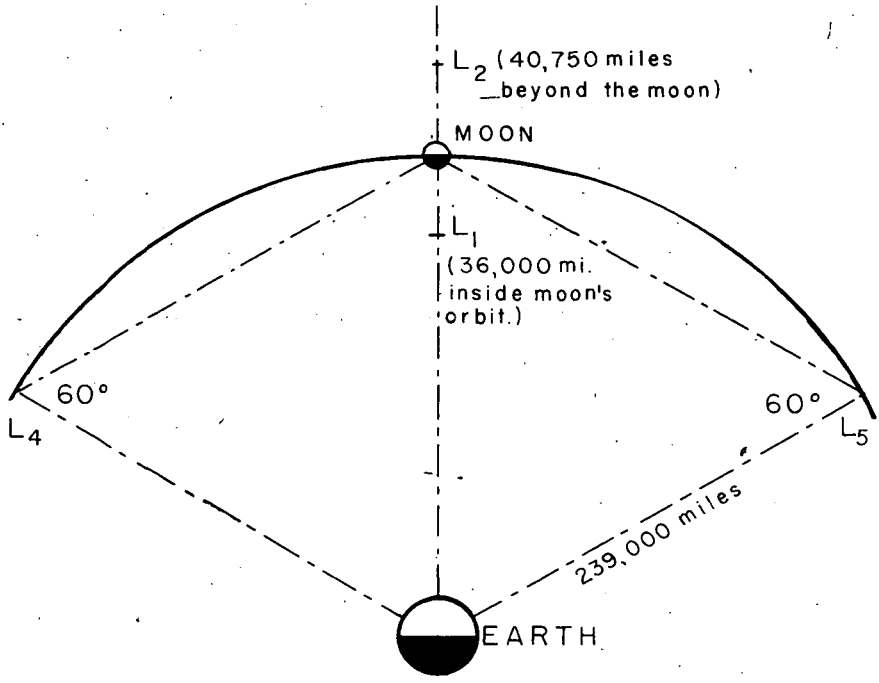

Fig. 1. The Lagrangian points in the earth-moon system.

ties at this moment. Now find a set of simple and elegant equations which permit you to predict the future motions of these bodies, accounting for their mutual attractions all the time.

Lagrange tried hard, but failed; and to this day nobody has been able to come up with such a set of equations.

Of course we can and do calculate such cases — for example, when it comes to predicting the motion of a comet. But it has to be done by way of endless step-by-step calculations which have to be checked against observations all the time.

But, while Lagrange failed to find an overall solution of the three-body problem, he did find a number of special cases where there was a solution, provided the bodies were in certain relative positions to each other. In fact, there were five such positions . . . which later were called the Lagrangian points, or L-points.

For an example of the Lagrangian points let us look at the

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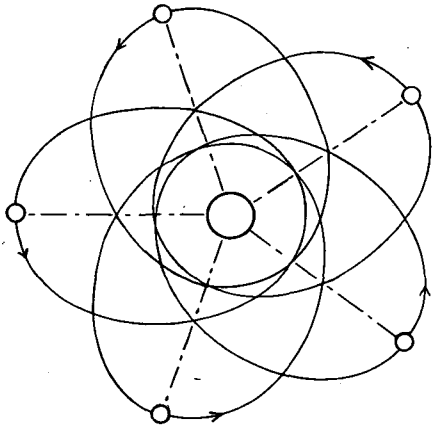

Fig. 2. Motion of four bodies of equal masses around a central body.

earth-moon system. (Fig. 1.) The earth and the moon are two of the three bodies. The third one would be a hypothetical satellite; and the problem would be to find a position in which it would have an easily predictable orbit. Two of these points are the ones known as equilaterals, positions L_4 and L_5, where the satellite would travel in the orbit of the moon and would, of course, have the same orbital period as the moon.

But there are two more such points which lie on the line connecting the center of the earth with the center of the moon. One of these two is closer to us than the moon; the other is beyond the moon. Now, if our moon did not exist, a satellite moving at the distance of the L_1 point — about 203,000 miles from the earth's center — and another satellite moving at the distance of the L_2 point — about 280,000 miles from the earth's center — would have different orbital periods. The L_1 satellite would need less time than our moon; the L_2 satellite would need more time. But because our moon is there the satellites in these points would have the same orbital period as our moon.

One may try to visualize this by imagining that our moon's gravitational force drags the L_2 satellite along a bit faster than it would move normally, and keeps the L_1 satellite back so that it does not move quite as fast as it would by itself.

We now know that the L_4 and L_5 positions are actually occupied by dust clouds. The L_1 point is not occupied, while an occupant of the L_2 point could never be seen from earth. (In the future both the L_1 and L_2 points may be occupied by radio relay satellites, if we get more than one human settlement on the moon. Because of the fairly strong curvature of the moon's surface, two distant lunar bases could not have direct radio contact. But they could talk to each other easily via relay satellites, located in the L_2 point for bases on the far side of the moon, and in the L_1 point for bases on the lunar hemisphere

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which is visible from the earth.)

BEFORE I go on, one loose end and one possible misunderstanding have to be taken care of.

The possible misunderstanding concerns the L_1 point. Everybody knows that, between the earth and the moon, there is a "neutral point", a point where the gravitational fields of earth and moon have the same strength. This neutral point is *not* the same as the L_1 point. In fact it is closer to the moon, roughly 24,000 miles from the lunar surface, or about 25,000 miles from the center of the moon.

As for the "loose end", as I called it, it is the simple question "where is L_3?" Well, L_3 is also on the line connecting the earth and the moon. But it is on the other side of the earth, below the bottom of our diagram.

Now, these Lagrangian points exist for every planet and its moons. They also exist if you consider the sun and a planet the two bodies. In other words, we could have equilaterals in the earth's orbit and in any other planetary orbit. In the case of Jupiter the equilateral points are known to be occupied, both the advance and the trailing position.

Quite recently Dr. W. B. Klemperer has done some more work on the three-body problem. Like Lagrange he failed to find a general solution, but he succeeded in extending Lagrange's special cases, which always dealt with three bodies — though of course *all* the L-points around one planet might be occupied — to special cases of many bodies.

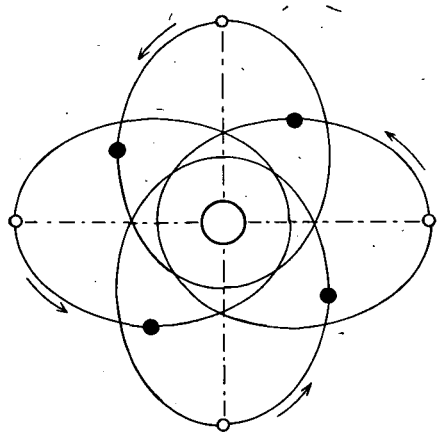

Fig. 3. A "Klemperer rosette" of five orbits.

You can have stable systems for three, four, five, six, eight and so forth bodies. They have to fulfill two conditions: they must orbit in the same plane; and they must, at any moment, form a regular polygon. Whether there is a major mass in the center of that polygon or not does not matter; the orbits would be stable with or without a central mass.

One such possible arrangement is shown in the second diagram. Here we have four bodies, orbiting in the same plane and in elliptical orbits of the same size and

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eccentricity. The open circles show the four bodies at their extreme distances from the central mass (which needn't be there) and they form a square. Some time later, all four bodies have moved the same distance along their orbits, as indicated by the closed circles, and they still form a square. This system would be stable. So would the five-body system shown in Fig. 3. And a 64-body system, forming a 64-cornered regular polygon, would be stable too.

I said a short while ago that two conditions must be fulfilled: the bodies must form a regular polygon at any moment and they must move in the same plane. Do they also have to have equal masses, as indicated in the diagrams?

The answer is that they do not have to have equal masses, provided another condition is fulfilled. If we had a six-body system, forming a regular hexagon, the bodies could be of two different masses, but then they would need a regular arrangement. The larger and the smaller bodies would have to alternate. In the hexagonal system, bodies 1, 3 and 5 would have to have the same mass and bodies 2, 4 and 6 also would have to have the same mass. But bodies 1, 3 and 5 could be five times as massive as bodies 2, 4 and 6.

These interesting arrangements would not last if an additional body wandered into the system from the outside. For this reason it is not very likely that such systems actually exist.

But it would be careless to proclaim that they do not exist. When Lagrange theoretized equilaterals back in 1772 no actual case was known, and because of such lack of confirmation in nature his "points" were very nearly forgotten. But then asteroid 1908-TG was discovered by Max Wolf in February, 1908, and when the orbit was computed it was found to move in the orbit of Jupiter. Its running number and name became 588-Achilles and it was the first equilateral found.

Maybe a "Klemperer rosette" will turn up, too!

— WILLY LEY

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

A. E. VAN VOGT returns in September issue of **If** with a fascinating new novelette, **The Expendables.** Out soon — watch for it!

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The Pain Peddlers

By ROBERT SILVERBERG

Fame and fortune awaited the lucky people on television's top show — and so did death!

Illustrated by NODEL

PAIN IS GAIN
—Greek Proverb

THE PHONE bleeped. Northrop nudged the cut-in switch and heard Maurillo say, "We got a gangrene, chief. They're amputating tonight."

Northrop's pulse quickened at the thought of action. "What's the tab?" he asked.

"Five thousand for all rights."

"Anesthetic?"

"Natch," Maurillo said. "I tried it the other way."

"What did you offer?"

"Ten. It was no go."

Northrop sighed. "I'll have to handle it myself, I guess. Where's the patient?"

"Clinton General. In the wards."

Northrop raised a heavy eyebrow and glowered into the screen. "In the *wards?*" he bellowed. "And you couldn't get them to agree?"

Maurillo seemed to shrink. "It was the relatives, chief. They were stubborn. The old man, he didn't seem to give a damn, but the relatives —"

"Okay. You stay there. I'm coming over to close the deal," Northrop snapped. He cut the phone out and pulled a couple of blank waiver forms out of his desk, just in case the relatives backed down. Gangrene was gangrene, but ten grand was ten

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grand. And business was business. The networks were yelling. He had to supply the goods or get out.

He thumbed the autosecretary. "I want my car ready in thirty seconds. South Street exit."

"Yes, Mr. Northrop."

"If anyone calls for me in the next half hour, record it. I'm going to Clinton General Hospital, but I don't want to be called there."

"Yes, Mr. Northrop."

"If Rayfield calls from the network office, tell him I'm getting him a dandy. Tell him — oh, hell, tell him I'll call him back in an hour. That's all."

"Yes, Mr. Northrop."

Northrop scowled at the machine and left his office. The gravshaft took him down forty stories in almost literally no time flat. His car was waiting, as ordered, a long, sleek '08 Frontenac with bubble top. Bullet-proof, of course. Network producers were vulnerable to crackpot attacks.

He sat back, nestling into the plush upholstery. The car asked him where he was going, and he answered.

"Let's have a pep pill," he said.

A pill rolled out of the dispenser in front of him. He gulped it down. *Maurillo, you make me sick,* he thought. *Why can't you close a deal without me? Just once?*

He made a mental note, Maurillo had to go. The organization couldn't tolerate inefficiency.

THE HOSPITAL was an old one. It was housed in one of the vulgar green-glass architectural monstrosities so popular sixty years before, a tasteless slab-sided thing without character or grace.

The main door irised and Northrop stepped through. The familiar hospital smell hit his nostrils. Most people found it unpleasant, but not Northrop. For him it was the smell of dollars.

The hospital was so old that it still had nurses and orderlies. Oh, plenty of mechanicals skittered up and down the corridors, but here and there a middle-aged nurse, smugly clinging to her tenure, pushed a tray of mush along, or a doddering orderly propelled a broom. In his early days on video Northrop had done a documentary on these living fossils of the hospital corridors. He had won an award for the film. He remembered it for its crosscuts from baggy-faced nurses to gleaming mechanicals, its vivid presentation of the inhumanity of the new hospitals. It was a long time since Northrop had done a documentary of that sort. A different kind of show was the order of the day now, ever since the intensi-

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fiers came in and telecasting medicine became an art.

A mechanical took him to Ward Seven. Maurillo was waiting there, a short, bouncy little man who wasn't bouncing much now. He knew he had fumbled. Maurillo grinned up at Northrop, a hollow grin, and said, "You sure made it fast, chief!"

"How long would it take for the competition to cut in?" Northrop countered. "Where's the patient?"

"Down by the end. You see where the curtain is? I had that put up. To get in good with the heirs. The relatives, I mean."

"Fill me in," Northrop said. "Who's in charge?"

"The oldest son, Harry. Watch out for him. Greedy."

"Who isn't?" Northrop sighed.

They were at the curtain now. Maurillo parted it. All through the long ward, patients were stirring. Potential subjects for taping, all of them, Northrop thought. The world was so full of different kinds of sickness — and one sickness fed on another.

HE STEPPED through the curtain. There was a man in the bed, drawn and gaunt, his hollow face greenish, stubbly. A mechanical stood next to the bed, with an intravenous tube running across and under the covers.

The patient looked at least ninety. Knocking off ten years for the effects of illness still made him pretty old, Northrop thought.

He confronted the relatives.

There were eight of them. Five women, ranging from middle age down to teens. Three men, the oldest about fifty, the other two in their forties. Sons and nieces and granddaughters, Northrop figured.

He said gravely, "I know what a terrible tragedy this must be for all of you. A man in the prime of his life — head of a happy family —" Northrop stared at the patient. "But I know he'll pull through. I can see the strength in him."

The oldest relative said, "I'm Harry Gardner. I'm his son. You're from the network?"

"I'm the producer," Northrop said. "I don't ordinarily come in person, but my assistant told me what a great human situation there was here, what a brave person your father was —"

The man in the bed slept on. He looked bad.

Harry Gardner said, "We made an arrangement. Five thousand bucks. We wouldn't do it, except for the hospital bills. They can really wreck you."

"I understand perfectly," Northrop said in his most unctuous tones. "That's why we're prepared to raise our offer. We're well aware of the disastrous ef-

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fects of hospitalization on a small family, even today, in these times of protection. And so we can offer —"

"No! There's got to be anesthetic!" It was one of the daughters, a round, drab woman with colorless thin lips. "We ain't going to let you make him suffer!"

Northrop smiled. "It would only be a moment of pain for him. Believe me. We'd begin the anesthesia immediately after the amputation. Just let us capture that single instant of —"

"It ain't right! He's old, he's got to be given the best treatment! The pain could kill him!"

"On the contrary," Northrop said blandly. "Scientific research has shown that pain is often beneficial in amputation cases. It creates a nerve block, you see, that causes a kind of anesthesia of its own, without the harmful side effects of chemotherapy. And once the danger vectors are controlled, the normal anesthetic procedures can be invoked, and —" he took a deep breath, and went rolling glibly on to the crusher—"with the extra fee we'll provide, you can give your dear one the absolute finest in medical care. There'll be no reason to stint."

WARY glances were exchanged. Harry Gardner said, "How much are you offering for this absolute finest in medical care?"

"May I see the leg?" Northrop answered.

The coverlet was peeled back. Northrop stared.

It was a nasty case. Northrop was no doctor, but he had been in this line of work for five years, and that was long enough to give him an amateur acquaintance with disease. He knew the old man was in bad shape. It looked as though there had been a severe burn, high up along the calf, which had probably been treated only with first aid. Then, in happy proletarian ignorance, the family had let the old man rot until he was gangrenous. Now the leg was blackened, glossy, and swollen from mid-calf to the ends of the toes. Everything looked soft and decayed. Northrop had the feeling that he could reach out and break the puffy toes off, one at a time.

The patient wasn't going to survive.

Amputation or not, he was rotten to the core by this time. If the shock of amputation didn't do him in, general debilitation would. It was a good prospect for the show. It was the kind of stomach-turning vicarious suffering that millions of viewers gobbled up avidly.

Northrop looked up and said, "Fifteen thousand if you'll allow

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a network-approved surgeon to amputate under our conditions. And we'll pay the surgeon's fee besides."

"Well —"

"And we'll also underwrite the entire cost of post-operative care for your father," Northrop added smoothly. "Even if he stays in the hospital for six months, we'll pay every nickel, over and above the telecast fee."

HE HAD them. He could see the greed shining in their eyes. They were faced with bankruptcy. He had come to rescue them; and did it matter all that much if the old man didn't have anesthetic when they sawed his leg off? Why, he was hardly conscious even now. He wouldn't really feel a thing. Not really.

Northrop produced the documents, the waivers, the contracts covering residuals and Latin-American re-runs, the payment vouchers, all the paraphernalia. He sent Maurillo scuttling off for a secretary, and a few moments later a glistening mechanical was taking it all down.

"If you'll put your name here, Mr. Gardner —"

Northrop handed the pen to the eldest son. Signed, sealed, delivered.

"We'll operate tonight," North said. "I'll send our surgeon over immediately. One of our best men. We'll give your father the care he deserves."

He pocketed the documents.

It was done. Maybe it was barbaric to operate on an old man that way, Northrop thought. But he didn't bear the responsibility, after all. He was just giving the public what it wanted. What the public wanted was spouting blood and tortured nerves.

And what did it matter to the old man, really? Any experienced medic could tell you he was as good as dead. The operation wouldn't save him. Anesthesia wouldn't save him. If the gangrene didn't get him, post-operative shock would do him in. At worst, he would suffer only a few minutes under the knife . . . but at least his family would be free from the fear of financial ruin.

On the way out, Maurillo said, "Don't you think it's a little risky, chief? Offering to pay the hospitalization expenses, I mean?"

"You've got to gamble a little sometimes to get what you want," Northrop said.

"Yeah, but that could run to fifty, sixty thousand! What'll that do to the budget?"

Northrop grinned. "We'll survive. Which is more than the old man will. He can't make it through the night. We haven't risked a penny, Maurillo. Not a stinking cent."

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RETURNING TO the office, Northrop turned the papers on the Gardner amputation over to his assistants, set the wheels in motion for the show and prepared to call it a day.

There was only one bit of dirty work left to do. He had to fire Maurillo.

It wasn't called firing, of course. Maurillo had tenure, just like the hospital orderlies and everyone else below executive rank. It would have to be more a kick upstairs than anything else.

Northrop had been increasingly dissatisfied with the little man's work for months now. Today had been the clincher. Maurillo had no imagination. He didn't know how to close a deal. Why hadn't he thought of underwriting the hospitalization? *If I can't delegate responsibility to him,* Northrop told himself, *I can't use him at all.* There were plenty of other assistant producers in the outfit who'd be glad to step in.

Northrop spoke to a couple of them. He made his choice: A young fellow named Barton, who'd been working on documentaries all year. Barton had done the plane-crash deal in London in the spring. He had a fine touch for the gruesome. He had been on hand at the Worlds' Fair fire last year at Juneau. Yes, Barton was the man.

The next part was the sticky one. Things could go wrong.

Northrop phoned Maurillo, even though Maurillo was even two rooms away — these things were never done in person — and said, "I've got some good news for you, Ted. We're shifting you to a new program."

"Shifting —?"

"That's right. We had a talk in here this afternoon, and we decided you were being wasted on the blood-and-guts show. You need more scope for your talents. So we're giving you a fat raise, boy, and we're moving you over to Kiddie Time. We think you'll really blossom there. You and Sam Kline and Ed Bragan ought to make a terrific team."

Northrop saw Maurillo's pudgy face crumble. The arithmetic was getting home; over here, Maurillo was Number Two, and on the new show, a much less important one, he'd be Number Three. The pay meant nothing, of course; didn't Internal Revenue take it all anyway? It was a thumping boot, and Maurillo knew it.

The mores of the situation called for Maurillo to pretend he was receiving a rare honor. He didn't play the game. He squinted and said, "Just because I didn't sign up that old man's amputation?"

"What makes you think — "

"Three years I've been with

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you! Three years, and you kick me out just like that!"

"I told you, Ted, we thought this would be a big opportunity for you. It's a step up the ladder. It's —"

Maurillo's fleshy face puffed up with rage. "It's getting junked," he said bitterly. "Well, never mind, huh? It so happens I've got another offer. I'm quitting before you can can me. You can take your tenure and —"

Northrop hastily blanked the screen.

The idiot, he thought. *The fat little idiot. Well, to hell with him!*

He cleared his desk, and cleared his mind of Ted Maurillo and his problems. Life was real, life was earnest. Maurillo just couldn't take the pace, that was all.

Northrop prepared to go home. It had been a long day.

AT EIGHT that evening came word that old Gardner was about to undergo the amputation. At ten, Northrop was phoned by the network's own head surgeon, Dr. Steele, with the news that the operation had failed.

"We lost him," Steele said in a flat, unconcerned voice. "We did our best, but he was a mess. Fibrillation set in, and his heart just ran away. Not a damned thing we could do."

"Did the leg come off?"

"Oh, sure. All this was *after* the operation."

"Did it get taped?"

"Processing it now."

"Okay," Northrop said. "Thanks for calling."

"Sorry about the patient."

"Don't worry yourself," Northrop said. "It happens to the best of us."

The next morning, Northrop had a look at the rushes. The screening was in the 23rd Floor studio, and a select audience was on hand — Northrop, his new assistant producer Barton, a handful of network executives, a couple of men from the cutting room. Slick, bosomy girls handed out intensifier helmets. No mechanicals doing the work here!

Northrop slipped the helmet on over his head. He felt the familiar surge of excitement as the electrodes descended and contact was made. He closed his eyes. There was a thrum of power somewhere in the room as the EEG-amplifier went into action. The screen brightened.

There was the old man. There was the gangrenous leg. There was Dr. Steele, crisp and rugged and dimple-chinned, the network's star surgeon, $250,000 a year's worth of talent. There was the scalpel, gleaming in Steele's hand.

Northrop began to sweat. The amplified brain waves were coming through the intensifier, and he

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felt the throbbing in the old man's leg, felt the dull haze of pain behind the old man's forehead, felt the weakness of being eighty years old and half dead.

Steele was checking out the electronic scalpel, now, while the nurses fussed around, preparing the man for the amputation. In the finished tape, there would be music, narration, all the trimmings, but now there was just a soundless series of images, and, of course, the tapped brain-waves of the sick man.

The leg was bare.

The scalpel descended.

Northrop winced as vicarious agony shot through him. He could feel the blazing pain, the brief searing hell as the scalpel slashed through diseased flesh and rotting bone. His whole body trembled, and he bit down hard on his lips and clenched his fists, and then it was over.

There was a cessation of pain. A catharsis. The leg no longer sent its pulsating messages to the weary brain. Now there was shock, the anesthesia of hyped-up pain, and with the shock came calmness. Steele went about the mop-up operation. He tidied the stump, bound it.

The rushes flickered out in anticlimax. Later, the production crew would tie up the program with interviews of the family, perhaps a shot of the funeral, a few observations on the problem of gangrene in the aged. Those things were the extras. What counted, what the viewers wanted, was the sheer nastiness of vicarious pain, and that they got in full measure. It was a gladiatorial contest without the gladiators, masochism concealed as medicine. It worked. It pulled in the viewers by the million.

Northrop patted sweat from his forehead.

"Looks like we got ourselves quite a little show here, boys," he said in satisfaction.

THE MOOD of satisfaction was still on him as he left the building that day. All day he had worked hard, getting the show into its final shape, cutting and polishing. He enjoyed the element of craftsmanship. It helped him to forget some of the sordidness of the program.

Night had fallen when he left. He stepped out of the main entrance and a figure strode forward, a bulky figure, medium height, tired face. A hand reached out, thrusting him roughly back into the lobby of the building.

At first Northrop didn't recognize the face of the man. It was a blank face, a nothing face, a middle-aged empty face. Then he placed it.

Harry Gardner. The son of the dead man.

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"Murderer!" Gardner shrilled. "You killed him! He would have lived if you'd used anesthetics! You phony, you murdered him so people would have thrills on television!"

Northrop glanced up the lobby. Someone was coming, around the the bend. Northrop felt calm. He could stare this nobody down until he fled in fear.

"Listen," Northrop said, "we did the best medical science can do for your father. We gave him the ultimate in scientific care. We —"

"You murdered him!"

"No," Northrop said, and then he said no more, because he saw the sudden flicker of a slice-gun in the blank-faced man's fat hand.

He backed away. But it didn't help, because Gardner punched the trigger and an incandescent bolt flared out, and sliced across Northrop's belly just as efficiently as the surgeon's scalpel had cut through the gangrenous leg.

Gardner raced away, feet clattering on the marble floor. Northrop dropped, clutching himself.

His suit was seared. There was a slash through his abdomen, a burn an eighth of an inch wide and perhaps four inches deep, cutting through intestines, through organs, through flesh. The pain hadn't begun yet. His nerves weren't getting the message through to his stunned brain.

But then they were; and Northrop coiled and twisted in agony that was anything but vicarious now.

Footsteps approached.

"Jeez," a voice said.

Northrop forced an eye open. Maurillo. Of all people, Maurillo.

"A doctor," Northrop wheezed. "Fast! Christ, the pain! Help me, Ted!"

Maurillo looked down, and smiled. Without a word, he stepped to the telephone booth six feet away, dropped in a token, punched out a call.

"Get a van over here, fast. I've got a subject, chief."

NORTHROP writhed in torment. Maurillo crouched next to him. "A doctor," Northrop murmured. "A needle, at least. Gimme a needle! The pain —"

"You want me to kill the pain?" Maurillo laughed. "Nothing doing. You just hang on. You stay alive till we get that hat on your head and tape the whole thing."

"But you don't work for me — you're off the program —"

"Sure," Maurillo said. "I'm with Transcontinental now. They're starting a blood-and-guts show too. Only they don't need waivers."

Northrop gaped. Transcontinental? That bootleg outfit that peddled tapes in Afghanistan and Mexico and Ghana and God knew

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where else? Not even a network show, he thought! No fee! Dying in agony for the benefit of a bunch of lousy tapeleggers. That was the worst part, Northrop thought. Only Maurillo would pull a deal like that.

"A needle! For God's sake, Maurillo, a needle!"

"Nothing doing. The van'll be here any minute. They'll sew you up, and we'll tape it nice."

Northrop closed his eyes. He felt the coiling intestines blazing within him. He willed himself to die, to cheat Maurillo.

But it was no use. He remained alive and suffering.

He lived for an hour. That was plenty of time to tape his dying agonies. The last thought he had was that it was a damned shame he couldn't star on his own show.

— **ROBERT SILVERBERG**

★★★★★

FORECAST

For four years now we've missed the work of one of *Galaxy's* all-time favorites, William Tenn, because the fellow has been off writing in other fields. Now the news is good. Tenn is back! Our next issue leads off with a long and fast-moving yarn of his called *The Men in the Walls.* It's a complete short novel, an area in which we feel we've been pretty lucky, what with such recent items as Jack Vance's *The Dragon Masters* and Damon Knight's *The Visitor at the Zoo.* One thing we know for sure: in that class, *The Men in the Walls* does nothing to lower our standards!

While the October *Galaxy* is on the stands, Murray Leinster will be receiving his long-overdue just deserts by appearing as Science Fiction's Guest of Honor at the annual convention. To help celebrate the occasion we're scheduling his newest Med Service novella for the issue. Its title is *Med Ship Man . . .* and it's a good one!

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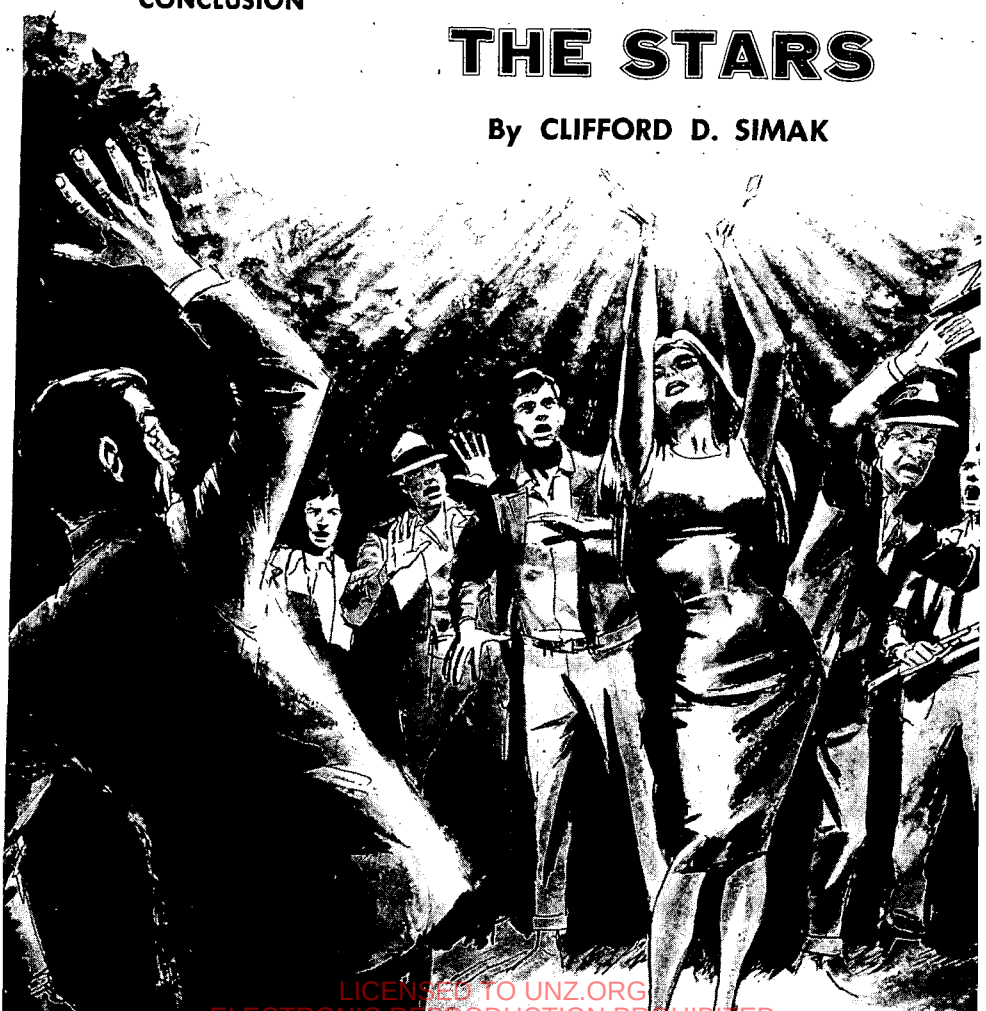
He was mankind's only hope for a place among the races of the stars — if he was still human!

Illustrated by WOOD

CONCLUSION

HERE GATHER THE STARS

By CLIFFORD D. SIMAK



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WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

Enoch Wallace was a strange man living in a strange world. He had lived in it for more than a century, since that first day when the alien creature who called himself Ulysses appeared to him and offered him the secret task of maintaining a transfer-point on Earth for the use of the galactic civilization.

The offer had certain advantages. For one thing, it conferred near-immortality. For another, it offered a chance to discover truths beyond the horizon of Earth. Enoch accepted, and began a life that shut him off from all his friends and neighbors — but brought him new ones.

First were the star travelers themselves, creatures of a thousand races who passed through the Earth station en route from one alien planet to another. Some were so strange and inhuman that Enoch could not communicate with them. Others were very like him . . . in every respect except appearance. Shrunken or huge, tentacled or shapeless, these visitors became friends, almost the only friends he had.

His other friends were stranger still. They were the creatures of his mind — the lovely woman named Mary, the dashing Civil War officer who was Enoch's imaginary ideal of a friend — who were summoned out of his own subconscious to give him companionship, and given form through the arts of the galactic civilization.

Enoch could no longer think of the place he lived in as "home"; it had been only "The Station" for so many years. It too changed. Its outward appearance was the same as the century-old farmhouse in which he had spent his boyhood. But it had been altered inside, to provide the communications equipment and the matter-transmitting tanks that served its function; its outside too was changed, though imperceptibly, to make it the most secure fortress Earth had ever seen. No human thing could pierce those walls. No man or woman could open its doors except Enoch himself.

His life of mystery was a challenge to the neighbors on the little farms nearby, especially to the family of the strange, mute girl named Lucy who was almost his only contact with the outside world. Even more it challenged the men from the United States government who had come to investigate rumors of strange goings-on . . . and found mysteries far beyond the rumors. Every move Enoch made was watched. The world was closing in on him. And at the same time there was trouble in the galactic civilization itself, a trouble that centered around the queer, symbolic object called The Talisman. Enoch could not understand what was happening; he could only wonder, and retreat to the company of his own mind-companions . . .

But even they seemed to be turning against him.

They knew what they were: figments of his imagination, and nothing more. And they would not let him forget it.

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XI

MARY HAD said that they must face up to the kind of things they were.

And what were they? Not what did he think they were, but what were they actually? What did they think themselves to be? For perhaps they knew much better than did he.

Where had Mary gone? When she left this room, into what kind of limbo did she disappear? Did she still exist? And if so, what kind of an existence would it be? Would she be stored away somewhere as a little girl would store away her doll in a box pushed back into the closet with all the other dolls?

He tried to imagine limbo. It was a nothingness; and if that were true, a being pushed into limbo would be an existence within a non-existence. There would be nothing — not space nor time, nor light, nor air. No color and no vision; just a never-ending nothing, that must lie at some point outside the universe.

He cried inside himself, *Mary, what have I done to you!*

And the answer lay there, hard and naked.

He had dabbled in a thing which he had not understood. And had, furthermore, committed that greater sin of thinking that he did understand. The fact of the matter was that he had understood enough to make the concept work, but not enough to know its consequences.

With creation went responsibility. He was not equipped to assume responsibility for what he had done.

They hated him and resented him. He did not blame them. He'd led them out and shown them the promised land of humanity—and then had led them back. He had given them everything that a human being had with one exception: the ability to exist within the human world.

They all hated him but Mary, and for Mary it was worse than hate. For she was condemned to love the monster who had created her.

Hate me, Mary! he pleaded. *Hate me like the others!*

HE HAD thought of them as shadow people, but the label had been wrong. They were neither shadowy or ghost-like. To the eyes they were solid and substantial, as real as any people. It was only when you tried to touch them that they were not real — for when you tried to touch them, there was nothing there.

A figment of his mind, he'd thought at first, but now he was not sure. At first they'd come only when he'd called them up, using the knowledge and the techniques

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that he had acquired in his study of work done by the thaumaturgists of Alphard XXII. But in recent years he had not called them up. There had been no occasion to. They anticipated him, and came.

David Ransome was himself, as he had dreamed himself to be, as he had wished himself to be — but, of course, as he had never been. He was the dashing Union officer, of not so high a rank as to be stiff and stodgy, but a fair cut above the man of ordinary standing. He was trim and debonair and definitely dare-devilish, loved by all the women, admired by all the men. He was a born leader and a good fellow all at once, at home alike in the field or drawing room.

And Mary? Funny, he thought, he had never called her anything but Mary. There had never been a surname. She had been simply Mary.

And she was at least two women, if not more than that. She was Sally Brown, who once had lived just down the road — and how long had it been, he wondered, since he'd thought of Sally Brown? And she was as well a tall, stately daughter of the South, the woman he had seen for a few moments only as he marched a dusty road in the hot Virginia sun. There had been a mansion, one of those great plantation

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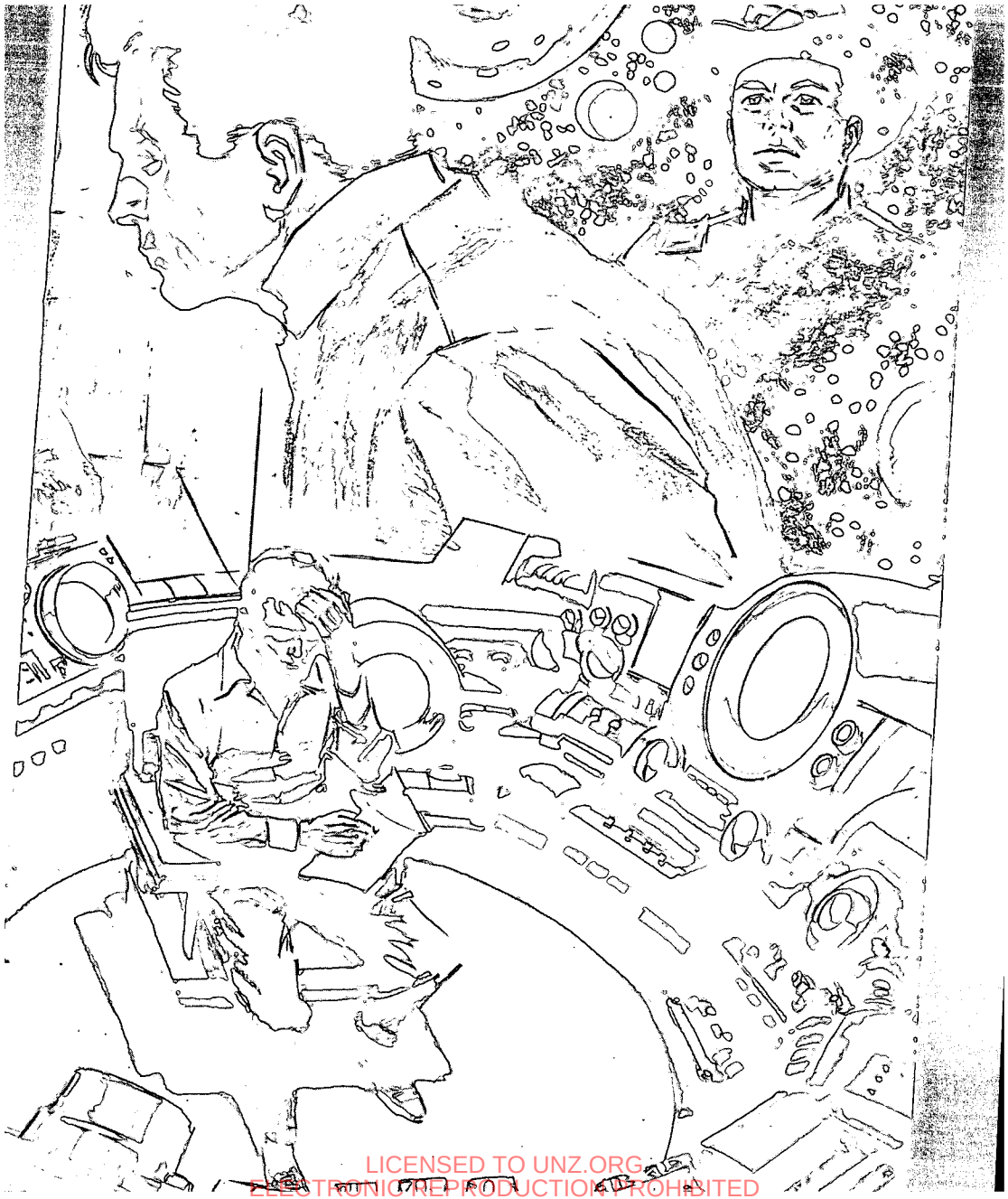

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houses, set back from the road, and she had been standing on the portico, beside one of the great white pillars, watching the enemy march past. Her hair was black and her complexion whiter than the pillar and she had stood so straight and proud, so defiant and imperious that he had remembered her and thought of her, dreamed of her — although he never spoke to her or knew her name.

So Mary had been both of these — Sally Brown and the unknown Virginia belle standing by the pillar to watch the troops march by — the shadow of them and perhaps of many others as yet unrealized by him, a composite of all he had ever known or seen or admired in women. She had been an ideal and perfection. She had been his perfect woman, created in his mind. And now, like Sally Brown, resting in her grave; like the Virginia belle, lost in the mists of time; like all the others who may have contributed to his molding of her, she was gone from him.

If he only could be sure, he thought, of where she might be now. If he only could be certain that she was in a semblance of death and untortured by her thoughts.

To believe that she was sentient was more than one could bear.

HE HEARD the hooting of the whistle that said a message waited and he took his head out of his hands. But he did not get up off the sofa.

Numbly his hand reached out to the coffee table that stood before the sofa, its top covered with some of the more colorful of the geegaws and gimcracks that had been left as gifts by travelers.

He picked up a cube of something that might have been some strange sort of glass or translucent stone — he had never been able to decide which it was, if either — and cupped it in his hands. Staring into it, he saw a tiny picture, three dimensional and detailed, of a faery world. It was a prettily grotesque place, set inside what might have been a forest glade, surrounded by what appeared to be flowering toadstools. Drifting down through the air, as if it might have been a part of the air itself, came what looked for all the world like a shower of jeweled snow, sparkling and glinting in the violet light of a great blue sun.

There were things dancing in the glade. They looked more like flowers than animals, but they moved with a grace and poetry that fired one's blood to watch. Then the faery place was wiped out and there was another place — a wild and dismal place, with grim, gaunt, beetling cliffs rear-

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ing high against a red and angry sky, while great flying things that looked like flapping dishrags beat their way up and down the cliffs, and there were others of them roosting, most obscenely, upon the scraggly projections that must have been some sort of misshapen trees growing from the very wall of rock. And from far below, from some distance that one could only guess, came the lonesome thundering of a rushing river.

He put the cube back upon the table.

He wondered what it was that one saw within its depths. It was like turning the pages of a book, with each page a picture of a different place, but never anything to tell where that place might be. When he first had been given it, he had spent fascinated hours, watching the pictures change as he held it in his hands. There had never been a picture that looked even faintly like any other picture and there was no end to them. One got the feeling that these were not pictures, actually, but that one were looking at the scene itself and that at any moment one might lose his perch upon wherever he was roosting and plunge head-first down into the place itself.

But it had finally palled upon him. It was a senseless business, gawking at a long series of places that had no identity. Senseless to him, of course, he thought; but not senseless, certainly, to that native of Enif V who had given it to him. It might, for all he knew, Enoch told himself, be of great significance and a treasure of great value.

That was the way it was with so many of the things he had. Even the ones that had given pleasure, he knew, he might be using wrongly, or, at least, in a way that had not been intended.

BUT THERE were some — a few, perhaps — that did have a value he could understand and appreciate, although in many instances their functions were of little use to him. There was the tiny clock that gave the local times for all the sectors of the galaxy. There was the perfume mixer — which was as close as he could come in naming it — which allowed a person to create the specific scent desired. Just get the mixture that one wanted and turn it on, and the room took on that scent until one should turn it off. He'd had some fun with it; one bitter winter day when, after long experimenting, he had achieved the scent of apple blossoms, and had lived a day in spring while a blizzard howled outside.

He reached out and picked up another piece — a beautiful thing

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that always had intrigued him, but for which he had never found a use. If, indeed, it had a use. It might be no more than a piece of art, a pretty thing that was meant to look at only. But it had a certain feel (if that were the word) which had led him to believe that it might have some specific function.

It was a pyramid of spheres, succeeding smaller spheres set on larger spheres. Some fourteen inches tall, it was a graceful piece, with each of the spheres a different color. Not just a color painted on; each color so deep and true that one knew instinctively the color was intrinsic to each sphere, that the entire sphere, from the center of it out to the surface, was all of its particular color.

There was nothing to indicate that any glue-like medium had been used to mount the spheres and hold them in their places. It looked for all the world as if someone had simply piled the spheres, one atop the other . . . and they had stayed that way.

Holding it in his hands, he tried to recall who had given it to him, but he had no memory of it.

The whistle of the message machine still was calling and there was work to do. He could not sit here, he told himself, mooning the afternoon away. He put the pyramid of spheres back on the table top, and rising, went across the room.

The message said: NO. 406,302 TO STATION 18327. NATIVE OF VEGA XXI ARRIVING AT 16532.82. DEPARTURE INDETERMINATE. NO LUGGAGE. CABINET ONLY, LOCAL CONDITIONS. CONFIRM.

Enoch felt a glow of happiness, looking at the message. It would be good to have a Hazer once again. It had been a month or more since one had passed through the station.

He could remember back to that first day he had ever met a Hazer, when the five of them had come. It must have been, he thought, back in 1914 or, maybe, 1915. World War I, which everyone then was calling the Great War, was underway, he knew.

The Hazer would be arriving at about the same time as Ulysses and the three of them could spend a pleasant evening. It was not often that two good friends visited here at once.

He stood a bit aghast at thinking of the Hazer as a friend, for more than likely the being itself was one he had never met. But that made little difference. A Hazer, any Hazer, would turn out to be a friend.

He got the cabinet in position beneath a materializer unit and double-checked to be sure that

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everything was exactly as it should be, then went back to the message machine and sent off the confirmation.

And all the time his memory kept on nagging at him. Had it been 1914, or perhaps a little later?

At the catalogue cabinet, he pulled out a drawer and found Vega XXI and the first date listed was July 12, 1915. He found the record book on the shelf and pulled it out and brought it to the desk. He leafed through it rapidly until he found the date.

XII

JULY 12, 1915. Arrived this afternoon (3:20 p.m.) five beings from Vega XXI, the first of their kind to pass through this station. They are biped and humanoid, and one gains the impression that they are not made of flesh — that flesh would be too gross for the kind of things they are. But, of course, they are made of flesh the same as anyone. They glow. Not with a visible light; but there is about them an aura that goes with them wherever they may be.

They were, I gathered, a sexual unit, the five of them — although I am not so certain I understand, for it is most confusing. They were happy and friendly. They carried with them an air of faint amusement, not at anything in particular, but at the universe itself, as if they might have enjoyed some sort of cosmic and very private joke that was known to no one else. They were on a holiday. They were en route to a festival (although that may not be the precise word for it) on another planet, where other life forms were gathering for a week of carnival. Just how or why they had been invited I was unable to determine. It must surely have been a great honor for them to be going there, but so far as I could see they did not seem to think so, but took it as their right. They were very happy and without a care and extremely self-assured and poised. But, thinking back on it, I would suppose that they are always that way. I found myself just a little envious at not being able to be as carefree and gay as they were, and trying to imagine how fresh life and the universe must seem to them. And a little resentful they could be, so unthinkingly, as happy as they were.

I had, according to instructions, hung hammocks so that they could rest, but they did not use them. They brought with them hampers that were filled with food and drink and sat down at my table and began to talk and feast. They asked me to sit with them. They chose two dishes and a bottle, which they assured

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me would be safe for me to eat and drink, the rest of their fare being somewhat doubtful for a metabolism such as mine. The food was delicious and of a kind I had never tasted — one dish being rather like the rarest and most delicate of old cheeses, and the other of a sweetness that was heavenly. The drink was somewhat like the finest of brandies, yellow in color and no heavier than water.

THEY ASKED me about myself and about my planet and they were courteous and seemed genuinely interested. They were quick of understanding in the things I told them. They told me they were headed for a planet, the name of which I had not heard before, and they talked among themselves, gaily and happily, but in such a way that I did not seem to be left out. From their talk I gained the fact that some form of art was being presented at the festival on this planet. The art form was not alone of music or painting, but was composed of sound and color and emotion and form, and other qualities for which there seem to be no words in the language of the Earth, and which I do not entirely recognize, only gaining the very faintest inkling of what they were talking of in this particular regard. I gained the impression of a three-dimensional symphony — although this is not entirely the right expression — which had been composed, not by a single being, but by a team of beings. They talked of the art form enthusiastically. I seemed to understand that it would not last for only several hours, but for days, and that it was an experience rather than a listening or seeing and that the spectators or audience did not merely sit and listen, but could, if they wished, and must, to get the most out of it, be participants. But I could not understand how they participated and felt I should not ask.

They talked of the people they would meet and when they had met them last and gossiped considerably about them, although in kindly fashion, leaving the impression that they and many other people went from planet to planet for some happy purpose. But whether there was any purpose other than enjoyment in their going, I could not determine. I gathered that there might be.

They spoke of other festivals. Not all of them were concerned with the one art form, but with other more specialized aspects of the arts, of which I could gain no adequate idea. They seemed to find a great and exuberant happiness in the festivals. It seemed to me that some certain significances aside from the art itself

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contributed greatly to that happiness.

I did not join in this part of their conversation, for, frankly, there was no opportunity. I would have liked to ask some questions, but I had no chance. I suppose that if I had, my questions must have sounded stupid to them; but given the chance, that would not have bothered me too much. And yet in spite of this, they managed somehow to make me feel I was included in their conversation. There was no obvious attempt to do this, and yet they made me feel I was one with them and not simply a station keeper they would spend a short time with.

At times they spoke briefly in the language of their planet, which is one of the most beautiful I have ever heard, but for the most part they conversed in the vernacular used by a number of the humanoid races, a sort of pidgin language made up for convenience. I suspect that this was done out of courtesy to me, and a great courtesy it was. I believe that they were truly the most civilized people I have ever met.

I HAVE said they glowed. I think by that I mean they glowed in spirit. It seemed that they were accompanied, somehow, by a sparkling golden haze that made happy everything it touched — almost as if they moved in some special world that no one else had found. Sitting at the table with them, I seemed to be included in this golden haze and I felt strange, quiet, deep currents of happiness flowing in my veins. I wondered by what route they and their world had arrived at this golden state and if my world could, in some distant time, attain it.

But back of this happiness was a great vitality, the bubbling, effervescent spirit with an inner core of strength and a love of living that seemed to fill every pore of them and every instant of their time.

They had only two hours' time. It passed so swiftly that I had to finally warn them it was time to go. Before they left, they placed two packages on the table and said they were for me. They thanked me for my table (what a strange way for them to put it). Then they said good-by and stepped into the cabinet (the extra large one), and I sent them on their way.

Even after they were gone, the golden haze seemed to linger in the room. It was hours before all of it was gone. I wished that I might have gone with them to that other planet and its festival.

One of the packages they left contained a dozen bottles of the brandy-like liquor. The bottles themselves were each a piece of

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art, no two of them alike, being formed of what I am convinced is diamond; but whether fabricated diamond or carved from some great stones, I have no idea. At any rate, I would estimate that each of them is priceless, and each carved in a disturbing variety of symbolisms, each of which, however, has a special beauty of its own.

In the other box was a — well, I suppose that, for lack of other name, you might call it a music box. The box itself is ivory, old yellow ivory that is as smooth as satin, covered by a mass of diagrammatic carving which must have some significance which I do not understand.

On the top of it is a circle set inside a graduated scale. When I turned the circle to the first graduation there was music and through all the room an interplay of many-colored light, as if the entire room was filled with different kinds of color, and through it all a far-off suggestion of that golden haze. And from the box came, too, perfumes that filled the room, and feeling, emotion — whatever one may call it — but something that took hold of one and made one said or happy or whatever might go with the music and the color and perfume. Out of that box came a world in which one lived out the composition or whatever it might be — living it with all that one had in him, all the emotion and belief and intellect of which one is capable.

Here, I am quite certain, was a recording of that art form of which they had been talking. And not one composition alone, but 206 of them, for that is the number of the graduation marks and for each mark there is a separate composition. In the days to come I shall play them all and make notes upon each of them and assign them names, perhaps, according to their characteristics, and from them, perhaps, can gain some knowledge as well as entertainment.

XIII

THE TWELVE diamond bottles, empty long ago, stood in a sparkling row upon the fireplace mantle. The music box, as one of his most choice possessions, was stored inside one of the cabinets, where no harm could come to it. Enoch thought, rather ruefully, that in all these years, despite regular use of it, he had not as yet played through the entire list of compositions. There were so many of the early ones that begged for a replaying that he was not a great deal more than halfway through the graduated markings.

The Hazers had come back, the five of them, time and time again, for it seemed that they found in

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this station, perhaps even in the man who operated it, some quality that pleased them. They had helped him learn the Vegan language and had brought him scrolls of Vegan literature and many other things. They had been, without any doubt, the best friends among the aliens (other than Ulysses) that he had ever had. Then one day they came no more. He wondered why, asking after them when other Hazers showed up at the station. But he had never learned what had happened to them.

That was the way it was with so many things. The galaxy was so large and so diverse and complex that you could never hope to keep in step with it. There was too much to know and too much to understand. And a large part of it was beyond human understanding.

He knew far more now about the Hazers and their art forms, their traditions and their customs and their history, than he'd known that first day he'd written of them, back in 1915. But he still was far from grasping many of the concepts that were commonplace with them.

There had been many of them since that day in 1915 and there was one he remembered in particular — the old, wise one, the philosopher, who had died on the floor beside the sofa.

They had been sitting on the sofa, talking. He even could remember the subject of their talk. The old one had been telling of the perverse code of ethics, at once irrational and comic, which had been built up by that curious race of social vegetables he had encountered on one of his visits to an off-track planet on the other side of the galactic rim. The old Hazer had a drink or two beneath his belt and he was in splendid form, relating incident after incident with enthusiastic gusto.

Suddenly, in mid-sentence, he stopped his talking, and slumped quietly forward. Enoch, startled, reached for him. But before he could lay a hand upon him, the old alien slid slowly to the floor.

The golden haze faded from his body and slowly flickered out. The body lay there, angular and bony and obscene, a terribly alien thing there upon the floor, a thing that was at once pitiful and monstrous. More monstrous, it seemed to Enoch, than anything in alien form he had ever seen before.

IN LIFE it had been a wondrous creature, but now, in death, it was an old bag of hideous bones with a scaly parchment stretched to hold the bones together. It was the golden haze, Enoch told himself, gulping, in something near to horror, that had made the Hazer seem so won-

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drous and so beautiful, so vital, so alive and quick, so filled with dignity. The golden haze was the life of them. When the haze was gone they became mere repulsive horrors that one gagged to look upon.

Could it be, he wondered, that the goldenness was the Hazers' life force and that they wore it like a cloak, as a sort of overall disguise? Did they wear their life force outside of them while all other creatures wore it on the inside?

A piteous little wind was lamenting in the gingerbread high up in the gables. Through the windows he could see battalions of tattered clouds fleeing in ragged retreat across the moon, which had climbed halfway up the eastern sky.

There was a coldness and a loneliness in the station — a far-reaching loneliness that stretched out and out, farther than mere Earth loneliness could go.

Enoch turned from the body and walked stiffly across the room to the message machine. He put in a call for a connection direct with Galactic Central, then stood waiting, gripping the sides of the machine with both his hands.

GO AHEAD, said Galactic Central.

Briefly, as objectively as he was able, Enoch reported what had happened.

There was no hesitation and there were no questions from the other end. Just simple directions (as if this was something that happened all the time) on how the situation should be handled. The Vegan must remain upon the planet of its death, its body to be disposed of according to the local customs obtaining on that planet. For that was the Vegan law, and, likewise, a point of honor. A Vegan, when he fell, must stay where he fell, and that place became, forever, a part of Vega XXI. There were such places, said Galactic Central, all through the galaxy.

THE CUSTOM HERE, typed Enoch, IS TO INTER THE DEAD.

THEN INTER THE VEGAN.

WE READ A VERSE OR TWO FROM OUR HOLY BOOK.

READ ONE FOR THE VEGAN, THEN. YOU CAN DO ALL THIS?

YES. BUT WE USUALLY HAVE IT DONE BY A PRACTITIONER OF RELIGION. UNDER THE PRESENT CIRCUMSTANCES, HOWEVER, THAT MIGHT BE UNWISE.

AGREED, said Galactic Central. YOU CAN DO AS WELL YOURSELF?

I CAN.

IT IS BEST THEN THAT YOU DO.

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WILL THERE BE RELATIVES OR FRIENDS ARRIVING FOR THE RITES?

NO.

YOU WILL NOTIFY THEM?

THEY ALREADY KNOW.

HE ONLY DIED A MOMENT OR TWO AGO.

NEVERTHELESS THEY KNOW.

WHAT ABOUT A DEATH CERTIFICATE?

NONE IS NEEDED. THEY KNOW OF WHAT HE DIED.

HIS LUGGAGE? THERE IS A TRUNK.

KEEP IT. IT IS A TOKEN FOR THE SERVICES YOU PERFORM FOR THE HONORED DEAD. THAT ALSO IS THE LAW.

BUT THERE MAY BE IMPORTANT MATTERS IN IT.

YOU WILL KEEP THE TRUNK. TO REFUSE WOULD INSULT THE MEMORY OF THE DEAD.

ANYTHING ELSE? asked Enoch. THAT IS ALL?

THAT IS ALL. PROCEED AS IF THE VEGAN WERE ONE OF YOUR OWN.

ENOCH CLEARED the machine and went back across the room. He stood above the Hazer, getting up his nerve to bend and lift the body to place it on the sofa. He shrank from touching it. It was so unclean and terrible, such a travesty on the shining creature that had sat there talking with him.

Since he met the Hazers he had loved them and admired them, had looked forward to each visit by them — by any one of them. And now he stood, a shivering coward who could not touch one dead.

It was not the horror only. In his years as keeper of the station, he had seen much of pure visual horror as portrayed in alien bodies. He had learned to submerge that sense of horror, to disregard the outward appearance of it, to regard all life as brother life, to meet all things as people.

It was some other unknown factor quite apart from horror that he felt. And yet this thing, he reminded himself, was a friend of his. As a dead friend, it demanded honor from him. It demanded love and care.

Blindly he drove himself to the task, stooped and lifted it.

It had almost no weight at all, as if in death it had lost a dimension of itself, had somehow become a smaller thing and less significant. Could it be, he wondered, that the golden haze might have a weight all of its own?

He laid the body on the sofa and straightened it as best he could. Then he went outside and, lighting the lantern in the shed, went down to the barn.

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It had been years since he had been there, but nothing much had changed. Protected by a tight roof from the weather, it had stayed snug and dry. There were cobwebs hanging from the beams and dust was everywhere. Straggling clumps of ancient hay, stored in the mow above, hung down through the cracks in the boards that floored the mow. The place had a dry, sweet, dusty smell about it, all the odors of animals and manure long gone.

Enoch hung the lantern on the peg behind the row of stanchions and climbed the ladder to the mow. Working in the dark, for he dared not bring the lantern into this dust heap of dried-out hay, he found the pile of oaken boards far beneath the eaves.

HERE, HE remembered, underneath these slanting eaves, had been a pretended cave in which, as a boy, he had spent many happy rainy days when he could not be outdoors. He had been Robinson Crusoe in his desert island cave, or some now nameless outlaw hiding from a posse, or a man holed up against the threat of scalp-hunting Indians. He had had a wooden gun that he had sawed out of a board, working it down later with drawshave and knife and a piece of glass to scrape it smooth. It had been something he had cherished through all his boyhood days — until that day, when he was twelve, that his father, returning home from a trip to town, had handed him a rifle for his very own.

He explored the stack of boards in the dark, determining by feel the ones that he would need. These he carried to the ladder and carefully slid them down to the floor below.

Climbing down the ladder, he went up the short flight of stairs to the granary, where the tools were stored. He opened the lid of the great tool chest and found that it was filled with long-deserted mice nests. Pulling out handfuls of the straw and hay and grass that the rodents had used to set up their one-time housekeeping, he uncovered the tools. The shine had gone from them, their surface grayed by the soft patina that came from long disuse. But there was no rust upon them and the cutting edges still were sharp.

Selecting the tools he needed, he went back to the lower part of the barn and fell to work. A century ago, he thought, he had done as he was doing now, working by lantern light to construct a coffin. And that time it had been his father lying in the house.

The oaken boards were dry and hard, but the tools still were in shape to handle them. He

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sawed and planed and hammered and there was the smell of sawdust. The barn was snug and silent, the depth of hay standing in the mow drowning out the noise of the complaining wind outside.

He finished the coffin. It was heavier than he had figured, so he found the old wheelbarrow, canted against the wall back of the stalls that once had been used for horses, and loaded the coffin on it. Laboriously, stopping often to rest, he wheeled it down to the little cemetery inside the apple orchard.

And here, beside his father's grave, he dug another grave, having brought a shovel and a pickaxe with him.

HE DID not dig it as deep as he would have liked to dig, not the full six feet that was decreed by custom, for he knew that if he dug it that deep he never would be able to get the coffin in. So he dug it slightly less than four, laboring in the light of the canted lantern, set atop the mound of dirt to cast its feeble glow. An owl came up from the woods and sat for a while, unseen, somewhere in the orchard, muttering and gurgling in between his hoots. The moon sank toward the west. The ragged clouds thinned out to let the stars shine through.

Finally it was finished, with the grave completed and the casket in the grave and the lantern flickering, the kerosene almost gone, and the chimney blacked from the angle at which the lantern had been canted.

Back at the station, Enoch hunted up a sheet in which to wrap the body. He put a Bible in his pocket and picked up the shrouded Vegan and, in the first faint light that preceded dawn, marched down to the apple orchard. He put the Vegan in the coffin and nailed shut the lid, then climbed from the grave.

Standing on the edge of it, he took the Bible from his pocket and found the place he wanted. He read aloud, scarcely needing to strain his eyes in the dim light to follow the text, for it was from a chapter that he had read many times:

"In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you . . ."

Thinking, as he read it, how appropriate it was; how there must need be many mansions in which to house all the souls in the galaxy — and of all the other galaxies that stretched, perhaps interminably, through space. Although if there were understanding, one might be enough.

He finished reading and recited the burial service, from memory, as best he could, not being abso-

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lutely sure of all the words. But sure enough, he told himself, to make sense out of it. Then he shoveled in the dirt.

The stars and moon were gone and the wind had died. In the quietness of the morning, the eastern sky was pearly pink.

Enoch stood beside the grave, with the shovel in his hand.

"Good-by, my friend," he said.

Then he turned and, in the first flush of the morning, went back to the station.

XIV

ENOCH GOT up from his desk and carried the record book back to the shelf and slid it into place.

He turned around and stood hesitantly.

There were things that he should do. He should read his papers. He should be writing up his journal. There were a couple of papers in the latest issues of the *Journal of Geophysical Research* that he should be looking at.

But he didn't feel like doing any of them. There was too much to think about, too much to worry over, too much to mourn.

The watchers still were out there. He had lost his shadow people. And the world was edging in toward war.

Perhaps he should not be worrying about what happened to the world. He could resign from the human race any time he wished. If he never went outside, if he never opened up the door, then it would make no difference to him what the world might do or what might happen to it. For he had a world. He had a greater world than anyone outside this station had ever dreamed about. He did not need the Earth.

But, even as he thought it, he knew he could not make it stick. In a very strange and funny way, he still did need the Earth.

He walked over to the door and spoke the phrase and the door came open. He walked into the shed and it closed behind him.

He went around the corner of the house and sat down on the steps that led up to the porch.

This, he thought, was where it all had started. He had been sitting here that summer day of long ago when the stars had reached out across vast gulfs of space and put a finger on him.

The sun was far down the sky toward the west and soon it would be evening. Already the heat of the day was falling off, with a faint, cool breeze creeping up out of the hollow that ran down to the river valley. Down across the field, at the edge of the woods, crows were wheeling in the sky and cawing.

It would be hard to shut the

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door, he knew, and keep it shut. Hard never to feel the sun or wind again, to never know the smell of the changing seasons as they came across the Earth. Man, he told himself, was not ready for that. He had not as yet become so totally a creature of his own created environment that he could divorce himself entirely from the physical characteristics of his native planet. He needed sun and soil and wind to remain a man.

He should do this oftener, Enoch thought, come out here and sit, doing nothing, just looking, seeing the trees and the river to the west and the blue of the Iowa hills across the Mississippi, watching the crows wheeling in the skies and the pigeons strutting on ridgepole of the barn.

It would be worthwhile each day to do it. What was another hour of aging? He did not need to save his hours — not now, he didn't. There might come a time when he'd become very jealous of them. When that day came, he could hoard the hours and minutes, even the seconds, in as miserly a fashion as he could manage.

He heard the sound of the running feet as they came around the farther corner of the house, a stumbling, exhausted running, as if the one who ran might have come a far way.

He leaped to his feet and strode out into the yard to see who it might be and the runner came stumbling toward him, with her arms outstretched. He put out an arm and caught her as she came close to him, holding her close against him so she would not fall.

"Lucy!" he cried. "Lucy! What has happened, child?"

HIS HANDS against her back were warm and sticky and he took one of them away to see that it was smeared with blood. The back of her dress was soaked and dark.

He grabbed her by the shoulders and shoved her away from him so he could see her face. It was wet with crying. There was terror in the face — and pleading with the terror.

She pulled away from him and turned around. Her hands came up and slipped her dress off her shoulders and let it slide halfway down her back. The flesh of the shoulders were ribboned by long slashes that still were oozing blood.

She pulled the dress up again and turned to face him. She made a pleading gesture and pointed backward down the hill, in the direction of the field that ran down to the woods.

There was motion down there, someone coming through the woods, almost at the edge of the old, deserted field.

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She must have seen it, too, for she came close against him, shivering, seeking his protection.

He bent and lifted her in his arms and ran for the shed. He spoke the phrase and the door came open and he stepped into the station. Behind him he heard the door go sliding shut.

Once inside, he stood there, with Lucy Fisher cradled in his arms, and knew that what he'd done had been a great mistake. In a sober moment, he never would have done it; if he'd given it a second thought, he would not have done it.

But he had acted on an impulse, with no thought at all. The girl had asked protection and here nothing in the world ever could get at her. But she was a human being. And no human being, other than himself, should have ever crossed the threshold.

But it was done. Once across the threshold, there was no way to change it.

He carried her across the room and put her on the sofa, then stepped back. She sat there, looking up at him, smiling very faintly, as if she did not know if she were allowed to smile in a place like this. She lifted a hand and tried to brush away the tears that were upon her cheeks.

She looked quickly around the room and her mouth made an O of wonder.

He squatted down and patted the sofa and shook a finger at her, hoping that she might understand that he meant she should stay there, that she must go nowhere else. He swept an arm in a motion to take in all the remainder of the station and shook his head as sternly as he could.

She watched him, fascinated, then she smiled and nodded, as if she might have understood.

He reached out and took one of her hands in his own and holding it, patted it as gently as he could, trying to reassure her, to make her understand that everything was all right if she only stayed exactly where she was.

She was smiling now, no longer wondering, apparently, if there were any reason that she should not smile.

She reached out her free hand and made a little fluttering gesture toward the coffee table, with its load of alien gadgets.

He nodded and she picked up one of them, turning it admiringly in her hand.

He got to his feet and went to the wall to take down the rifle.

Then he went outside to face whatever had been pursuing her.

TWO MEN were coming up the field toward the house and Enoch saw that one of them was Hank Fisher, Lucy's father. He had met the man, rather briefly,

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several years ago, on one of his walks. Hank had explained, rather sheepishly and when no explanation had been necessary, that he was hunting for a cow which had strayed away. But from his furtive manner, Enoch had deduced that his errand was something shadier than the hunting of a cow — although he could not imagine what it might have been.

The other man was younger. No more, perhaps, than sixteen or seventeen. More than likely, Enoch told himself, he was one of Lucy's brothers.

Enoch stood by the porch and waited.

Hank was carrying a coiled whip in his hand. Looking at it, Enoch understood those wounds on Lucy's shoulders. He felt a swift flash of anger, but tried to fight it down. He could deal better with Hank Fisher if he kept his temper.

The two men stopped three paces or so away.

"Good afternoon," said Enoch.

"You seen my gal?" asked Hank.

"And if I have?" asked Enoch.

"I'll take the hide off of her," yelled Hank, flourishing the whip.

"In such a case," said Enoch, "I don't believe I'll tell you anything."

"You got her hid," charged Hank.

"You can look around," said Enoch.

Hank took a quick step forward, then thought better of it.

"She got what she had coming to her," he yelled. "And I ain't finished with her yet. There ain't no one, not even my own flesh and blood, can put a hex on me."

Enoch said nothing. Hank stood, undecided.

"She meddled," he said. "She had no call to meddle. It was none of her damn business."

The young man said: "I was just trying to train Butcher. Butcher," he explained to Enoch, "is a coon-hound pup."

"That is right," said Hank. "He wasn't doing nothing wrong. The boys caught a young coon the other night. Took a lot of doing. Roy, here, had staked out the coon to a tree, and he had Butcher on a leash. He was letting Butcher fight the coon. Not hurting anything. He'd pull Butcher off before any damage could be done and let them rest a while. Then he'd let Butcher at the coon again."

"It's the best way in the world," said Roy, "to train a dog."

"That is right," said Hank. "That is why they caught the coon."

"We needed it," said Roy, "to train this Butcher pup."

"THIS all is fine," said Enoch, "and I am glad to hear it. But what has it got to do with

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Lucy — and, for that matter, with me?"

"She interfered," said Hank. "She tried to stop the training. She tried to grab Butcher away from Roy, here."

"For a dummy," Roy said, "she is mite too uppity."

"You hush your mouth," his father told him sternly, swinging around on him.

Roy mumbled to himself, falling back a step.

Hank turned back to Enoch.

"Roy knocked her down," he said. "He shouldn't have done that. He should have been more careful."

"I didn't mean to," Roy said. "I just swung my arm out to keep her away from Butcher."

"That is right," said Hank. "He swung a bit too hard. But there wasn't any call for her doing what she did. She tied Butcher up in knots so he couldn't fight that coon. Without laying a finger on him, mind you, she tied him up in knots. He couldn't move a muscle. That made Roy mad." He appealed to Enoch earnestly. "Wouldn't that have made you mad?"

"I don't think it would," said Enoch. "But then I'm not a coon-dog man."

Hank stared in wonder at this lack of understanding, but he went on with his story. "Roy got real mad at her. He'd raised that Butcher. He thought a lot of him. He wasn't going to let no one, not even his own sister, tie that dog in knots. So he went after her and she tied him up in knots, just like she did to Butcher. I never seen a thing like it in all my born days. Roy just stiffened up and then he fell down to the ground and his legs pulled up against his belly and he wrapped his arms around himself and he laid there on the ground, pulled into a ball. Him and Butcher, both. But she never touched that coon. She never tied him in no knots. Her own folks is all she touched."

"It didn't hurt," said Roy. "It didn't hurt at all."

"I was sitting there," said Hank, "braiding this here bull whip. Its end had frayed and I fixed a new one on it. And I seen it all, but I didn't do a thing until I saw Roy there, tied up on the ground. And I figured then it had gone far enough. I am a broad-minded man; I don't mind a little wart charming and other piddling things like that. There have been a lot of people who have been able to do that. It ain't no disgrace at all. But this thing of tying people into knots . . ."

"So you hit her with the whip," said Enoch.

"I DID my duty," Hank told him, solemnly. "I ain't about to have no witch in any family

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of mine. I hit her a couple of licks, with her making that dumb show of hers to try to get me stopped. But I had my duty and I kept on hitting. If I did enough of it, I figured, I'd knock it out of her. That was when she put the hex on me. Just like she did on Roy and Butcher, but in a different way. She turned me blind! She blinded her own father! I couldn't see a thing. I just stumbled around the yard, yelling and clawing at my eyes. And then they got all right again, but she was gone. I saw her running through the woods and up the hill. So Roy and me, we took out after her."

"And you think I have her here?"

"I know you have," said Hank.

"Okay," said Enoch. "Have a look around."

"You can bet I will," Hank told, grimly. "Roy, take the barn. She might be hiding there."

Roy headed for the barn. Hank went into the shed, came out almost immediately, strode down to the sagging chicken house.

Enoch stood and waited, the rifle cradled on his arm.

He had trouble here, he knew — more trouble than he'd ever had before. There was no such thing as reasoning with a man of Hank Fisher's stripe. There was no approach, right now, that he would understand. All that he could do was to wait until Hank's temper had cooled off. Then there might be an outside chance of talking sense to him.

The two of them came back.

"She ain't nowhere around," said Hank. "She is in the house."

Enoch shook his head. "There can't anyone get into that house."

"Roy," said Hank, "climb them there steps and open up that door."

Roy looked fearfully at Enoch.

"Go ahead," said Enoch.

Roy moved forward slowly and went up the steps. He crossed the porch and put his hand upon the front doorknob and turned. He tried again. He turned around.

"Pa," he said, "I can't turn it. I can't get it open."

"Hell," said Hank, disgusted, "you can't do anything."

Hank took the steps in two jumps, paced wrathfully across the porch. His hand reached out and grasped the knob and wrenched at it powerfully. He tried again and yet again. He turned angrily to face Enoch.

"What is going on here?" he yelled.

"I told you," Enoch said, "that you can't get in."

"The hell I can't!" roared Hank.

HE tossed the whip to Roy and came down off the porch, striding over to the woodpile that stood beside the shed. He

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wrenched the heavy, double-bitted axe out of the chopping block.

"Careful with that axe," warned Enoch. "I've had it for a long time and I set a store by it."

Hank did not answer. He went up on the porch and squared off before the door.

"Stand off," he said to Roy. "Give me elbow room."

Roy backed away.

"Wait a minute," Enoch said. "You mean to chop down that door?"

"You're damned right I do."

Enoch nodded gravely.

"Well?" asked Hank.

"It's all right with me if you want to try."

Hank took his stance, gripping the handle of the axe. The steel flashed swiftly, up over his shoulder, then down in a driven blow.

The edge of the steel struck the surface of the door and turned, deflected by the surface, changed its course, bouncing from the door. The blade came slicing down and back. It missed Hank's spraddled leg by no more than an inch and the momentum of it spun him half around.

He stood there, foolishly, arms outstretched, hands still gripping the handle of the axe. He stared at Enoch.

"Try again," invited Enoch.

Rage flowed over Hank. His face was flushed with anger.

"By God, I will!" he yelled.

He squared off again and this time he swung the axe, not at the door, but at the window set beside the door.

The blade struck and there was a high singing sound as pieces of sun-bright steel went flying through the air.

Ducking away, Hank dropped the axe. It fell to the floor of the porch and bounced. One blade was broken, the metal sheared away in jagged breaks. The window was intact. There was not a scratch upon it.

Hank stood there for a moment, staring at the broken axe, as if he could not quite believe what he saw.

Silently he stretched out his hand and Roy put the bull whip in it.

The two of them came down the stairs.

They stopped at the bottom of them and looked at Enoch. Hank's hand twitched on the whip.

"If I were you," said Enoch, "I wouldn't try it, Hank. I can move awfully fast."

He patted the gun butt. "I'd have the hand off you before you could swing that whip."

Hank breathed heavily. "There's the devil in you, Wallace," he said. "And there's the devil in her, too. You're working together, the two of you. Sneak-

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ing around in the woods, meeting one another."

Enoch waited, watching the both of them.

"God help me," cried Hank. "My own daughter is a witch!"

"I think," said Enoch, "you should go back home. If I happen to find Lucy, I will bring her there."

Neither of them made a move.

"You haven't heard the last of this," yelled Hank. "You have my daughter somewhere and I'll get you for it."

"Any time you want," said Enoch, "but not now."

He made an imperative gesture with the rifle barrel.

"Get moving," he said. "And don't come back. Either one of you."

They hesitated for a moment, looking at him, trying to gauge him, trying to guess what he might do next.

Slowly they turned and, walking side by side, moved off down the hill.

XV

HE should have killed both of them, he thought. They were not fit to live.

He glanced down at the rifle. His hands had such a grip on the gun that his fingers stood out white and stiff against the satin brown of the wood.

He gasped a little in his effort to fight down the rage that boiled inside him, trying to explode. If they had stayed here any longer he'd have given in to that towering rage.

Even as it stood, it would be bad. They would say he was a madman; that he had run them off at gunpoint. They might even say that he had kidnaped Lucy and was holding her against her will. They would stop at nothing to make him all the trouble that they could.

He had no illusions about what they might do, for he knew the breed, vindictive in their smallness — little vicious insects of the human race.

He stood beside the porch and watched them down the hill, wondering how a girl so fine as Lucy could spring from such decadent stock. Perhaps her handicap had kept her from becoming another one of them. Perhaps if she could have talked with them or listened, she would in time have become as shiftless and as vicious as any one of them.

It had been a great mistake to get mixed up in a thing like this. A man in his position had too much to lose.

And yet what could he have done? Could he have refused to give Lucy his protection, with the blood soaking through her dress from the lashes that lay across

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her shoulders? Should he have ignored the frantic, helpless pleading in her face?

He turned heavily around and went back inside the station.

LUCY was still sitting on the sofa. She held a flashing object in her hand, staring at it raptly. Her face again held that same vibrant and alert expression he had seen that morning when she'd held the butterfly.

He laid the rifle on the desk and stood quietly there, but she must have caught the motion of him. She looked quickly up. Then her eyes went back to the flashing thing in her hands.

It was the pyramid of spheres. Now all the spheres were spinning slowly, in alternating clockwise and counterclockwise motions. As they spun they shone and glittered, each in its own particular color, as if there might be, deep inside each one of them, a source of soft, warm light.

Enoch caught his breath at the beauty and the wonder of it — the old, hard wonder of what this thing might be and what it might be meant to do. He had puzzled at it a hundred times or more. He could find nothing significant. So far as he could see, it was only meant to look at, although there had been that persistent feeling of purpose—that, perhaps, somehow, it was meant to operate.

And now it was in operation.

He had tried it a hundred times; Lucy had picked it up just once; and she had got it figured out.

He noticed the rapture on her face. Was it possible that she knew its purpose?

He went across the room and touched her arm. She lifted her face to look at him, and in her eyes he saw the gleam of happiness and excitement.

He made a questioning gesture toward the pyramid, trying to ask if she knew what it might be. But she did not understand him. Or perhaps she knew, but knew as well how impossible it would be to explain its purpose. She made that happy, fluttery motion with her hand again, indicating the table with its load of gadgets. There was laughter in her face.

Just a kid, Enoch told himself, with a box heaped high with new and wondrous toys.

Was that all it was to her? Was she happy and excited merely because she suddenly had become aware of all the beauty and the novelty of the things stacked there on the table?

He turned wearily and went back to the desk. He picked up the rifle and hung it on the pegs.

SHE should not be in the station. No human being other than himself should ever be in-

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side the station. Bringing her here, he had broken that unspoken understanding he had with the aliens who had installed him as a keeper. Although, of all humans, Lucy was the one who could possibly be exempt from the restriction. For she could never tell the things that she had seen.

She could not remain. She must be taken home. Otherwise there would be a massive hunt for her, a lost girl — a beautiful deaf-mute.

A story like that would bring in newspapermen in a day or two. The woods would be swarming with searchers.

Hank Fisher would tell how he'd tried to break into the house and couldn't. Then others would try to break in and there'd be hell to pay.

Enoch sweated, thinking of it.

All the years of keeping out of people's way would be for nothing then. This strange house on a lonely ridge would become an international mystery, and a challenging target for all the crackpots of the world.

He went to the medicine cabinet, to get the healing ointment that had been included in the drug packet provided by Galactic Central.

He opened the little box. More than half of it remained. He'd used it through the years, but sparingly. There was, in fact, little need to use a great deal of it.

He went across the room to Lucy, showed her what he had and made motions to show her what it was for. She slid her dress off her shoulders and he bent to look at the slashes.

The bleeding had stopped, but the flesh was red and angry.

Gently he rubbed ointment into the stripes that the whip had made.

She had healed the butterfly, he thought; but she could not heal herself.

On the table in front of her the pyramid of spheres still was flashing and glinting, throwing a flickering shadow of color all about the room.

It was operating, but what could it be doing?

XVI

ULYSSES came as twilight was deepening into night.

Enoch and Lucy had just finished with their supper and were sitting at the table when Enoch heard his footsteps.

The alien stood in shadow and he looked, Enoch thought, more than ever like the cruel clown. His lithe, flowing body had the look of smoked, tanned buckskin. The patchwork color of his hide seemed to shine faintly; the hard

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angles of his face, the bald head, the flat, pointed ears pasted tight against the skull, lent him a vicious fearsomeness.

If one did not know him for the gentle character that he was, Enoch told himself, he would be enough to scare a man out of seven years of growth.

"We had been expecting you," said Enoch. "The coffee pot is boiling."

Ulysses took a slow step forward, then paused.

"You have another with you. A human, I would say."

"There is no danger," Enoch told him.

"Of another gender. A female, is it not? You have found a mate?"

"No," said Enoch. "She is not my mate."

"You have acted wisely through the years," Ulysses told him. "In a position such as yours, a mate is not the best."

"You need not worry. There is a malady upon her. She has no communication. She can neither hear nor speak."

"A malady?"

"Yes, from the moment she was born. She has never heard or spoken. She can tell of nothing here."

"Sign language?"

"She knows no sign language. She refused to learn it."

"She is a friend of yours."

"For some years," said Enoch. "She came seeking my protection. Her father used a whip to beat her."

"This father knows she's here?"

"He thinks she is. But he cannot know."

Ulysses came slowly out of the darkness and stood within the light.

Lucy was watching him. There was no terror on her face. Her eyes were level and untroubled and she did not flinch.

"She takes me well," Ulysses said. "She does not run or scream."

"She could not scream," said Enoch, "even if she wished."

"I MUST be most repugnant," Ulysses said, "at first sight to any human."

"She does not see the outside only. She sees inside of you as well."

"Would she be frightened if I made a human bow to her?"

"I think," said Enoch, "she might be very pleased."

Ulysses made his bow, formal and exaggerated, with one hand upon his leathery belly, bowing from the waist.

Lucy smiled and clapped her hands.

"You see?" Ulysses cried, delighted. "I think that she may like me."

"Why don't you sit down,

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then," suggested Enoch, "and we all will have some coffee."

"I had forgotten of the coffee. The sight of this other human drove coffee from my mind."

He sat down at the place where the third cup had been set, waiting for him. Enoch started around the table, but Lucy rose and went to get the coffee.

"She understands?" Ulysses asked.

Enoch shook his head. "You sat down by the cup and the cup was empty."

She poured the coffee, then went over to the sofa.

"She will not stay with us?" Ulysses asked.

"She's intrigued by that table full of trinkets. She set one of them to going."

"You plan to keep her here?"

"I can't keep her," Enoch said. "There'll be a hunt for her. I'll have to take her home."

"I do not like it," Ulysses said.

"Nor do I. Let's admit at once that I should not have brought her here. But at the time it seemed the only thing to do. I had no time to think it out."

"You've done no wrong," said Ulysses, softly.

"She cannot harm us," said Enoch. "Without communication of any kind . . ."

"It's not that," Ulysses told him. "She's just a complication and I do not like further complications. I came tonight to tell you, Enoch, that we are in trouble."

"Trouble? But there's not been any trouble."

Ulysses lifted his coffee cup and took a long drink of it.

"That is good," he said. "I carry back the bean and make it at my home. But it does not taste the same."

"This trouble?"

"You remember the Vegan that died here several of your years ago."

Enoch nodded. "The Hazer."

"The being has a proper name of his own . . ."

Enoch laughed. "You don't like our nicknames."

"It is not our way," Ulysses said.

"My name for them," said Enoch, "is a mark of my affection."

"You buried this Vegan."

"In my family plot," said Enoch. "As if he were my own. I read a verse above him."

"That is well and good," Ulysses said. "That is as it should be. But the body's gone."

"GONE! It can't be gone!" cried Enoch.

"It has been taken from the grave."

"But you can't know," protested Enoch. "How could you know?"

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"Not I. The Vegans are the ones who know."

"But they're light years distant from here . . ."

And then he was not too sure. For on that night the wise old one had died and he'd messaged Galactic Central he had been told that the Vegans had known the moment he had died. And there had been no need for a death certificate, for they knew of what he died.

It seemed impossible, of course. But there were too many impossibilities in the galaxy — which turned out, after all, to be entirely possible — for a man to ever know when he stood on solid ground.

Was it possible, he wondered, that each Vegan had some sort of mental contact with every other Vegan? Or that some central census bureau (to give a human designation to something that was scarcely understandable) might have some sort of official linkage with every living Vegan, knowing where it was and how it was and what it might be doing?

Something of the sort, Enoch admitted, might indeed be possible. It was not beyond the astounding capabilities that one found on every hand throughout the galaxy. But to maintain a similar contact with the Vegan dead was something else again.

"The body's gone," Ulysses said. "I can tell you that and know it is the truth. You're held accountable."

"By the Vegans?"

"By the Vegans, yes. And the galaxy."

"I did what I could!" said Enoch hotly. "I did what was required. I filled the letter of the Vegan law. I paid the dead my honor and the honor of my planet. It is not right that the responsibility should go on forever. Not that I can believe the body can be really gone. There is no one who would take it. No one knew of it!"

"By human logic," Ulysses told him, "you, of course, are right. But not by Vegan logic. And in this case Galactic Central would tend to support the Vegans."

Enoch said testily, "The Vegans happen to be friends of mine. I have never met one of them that I didn't like or couldn't get along with. I can work it out with them."

"If only the Vegans were concerned," said Ulysses, "I am quite sure you could. But the situation is complicated. The Vegans have known for some time that the body had been taken. They were disturbed, of course, but out of certain considerations, they kept their silence."

"They needn't have. They could have come to me. I don't know what could have been done

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. . . but I would have tried to do something."

"Silent not because of you. Because of something else."

ULYSSES finished off his coffee and poured himself another cup. He filled Enoch's half-filled cup and set the pot aside.

Enoch waited.

"You may not have been aware of it," said Ulysses, "but at the time this station was established, there was considerable opposition to it from a number of races in the galaxy. There were many reasons cited, as is the case in all such situations, but the underlying reason, when you get down to basics, rest squarely on the continual contest for racial or regional advantage."

Enoch nodded. "I had a hint of this. I hadn't paid much attention to it."

"It's largely a matter of direction," Ulysses said. "When Galactic Central began its expansion into this spiral arm, it meant there was no time or effort available for expansions in other directions. There is one large group of races which has held a dream for many centuries of expanding into some of the nearby globular clusters. It does make a dim sort of sense, of course. With the techniques that we have, the longer jump across space to some of the closer clusters is entirely possible. Another thing. The clusters seem to be extraordinarily free of dust and gas; so that once we got there, we could expand more rapidly throughout the cluster than we can in many parts of the galaxy. But, at best, it's a speculative business, for we don't know what we'll find there. After we've made all the effort and spent all the time we may find little or nothing, except, possibly, some more real estate. And we have plenty of that in the galaxy. But the clusters have a vast appeal for certain types of minds."

Enoch nodded. "I can see that. It would be the first venturing out of the galaxy itself. It might be the first short step on the route that could lead us to other galaxies."

Ulysses peered at him. "You, too," he said. "I might have known."

Enoch said, smugly: "I am that type of mind."

"WELL, anyhow," he said, "there was this globular-cluster faction — I suppose you'd call it that — which contended bitterly when we began our move in this direction. You understand that we've barely begun the expansion into this neighborhood. We have less than a dozen stations; we'll need a hundred. It will take centuries before the network is complete."

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"So this faction is still contending," Enoch said. "There still is time to stop this spiral-arm project."

"That is right. And that's what worries me. For the faction is set to use this incident of the missing body as an emotion-charged argument against the extension of this network. It is being joined by other groups that are concerned with certain special interests. And these special interest groups see a better chance of getting what they want if they can wreck this project."

"Wreck it?"

"Yes, wreck it. They will start screaming, as soon as the body incident becomes open knowledge, that a planet so barbaric as the Earth is no fit location for a station. They will insist that this station be abandoned."

"But they can't do that!"

"They can," Ulysses said. "They will say it is degrading and unsafe to maintain a station so barbaric that even graves are rifled, on a planet where the honored dead cannot rest in peace. It is the kind of highly emotional argument that will gain wide acceptance and support in some sections of the galaxy. The Vegans tried their best. They tried to hush it up, for the sake of the project. They have never done a thing like that before. They are a proud people and they feel a slight to honor perhaps more deeply than many other races. Yet, for the greater good, they were willing to accept dishonor. And would have if they could have kept it quiet. But the story leaked out somehow — by good espionage, no doubt. And they cannot stand the loss of face in advertised dishonor. The Vegan who will be arriving here this evening is an official representative charged with delivering an official protest."

"To me?"

"To you, and through you to the Earth."

"But the Earth is not concerned. The Earth doesn't even know."

"Of course it doesn't. So far as Galactic Central is concerned, you are the Earth. You represent the Earth."

Enoch shook his head. It was a crazy way of thinking. But, he told himself, he should not be surprised. It was the kind of thinking he should have expected. He was too hidebound, he thought, too narrow.

"But even if you have to abandon Earth," he said, "you could go out to Mars and build a station there."

"You don't understand," Ulysses told him. "This station is no more than a toehold. The aim is to wreck the project. If they can force us to abandon one station,

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then we stand discredited. Then all our judgments come up for review."

"BUT even if the project should be wrecked," Enoch pointed out, "there is no surety that any group would gain. It would only throw the question of where the time and energy should be used into an open debate. You say that there are many special-interest factions banding together to carry on the fight against us. Suppose they do win. Then they must turn around and start fighting among themselves.'"

"Of course," Ulysses admitted, "but then each of them has a chance. The way it is they have no chance at all. There is one group on the far side of the galaxy that wants to move out into the thinly populated sections of one particular section of the rim. They still believe in an ancient legend which says that their race arose as the result of immigrants from another galaxy who landed on the rim and worked their way inward over many galactic years. They think that if they can get out to the rim they can turn that legend into history to their greater glory . . . Another group wants to go into a small spiral arm because of an obscure record that many eons ago their ancestors picked up some virtually undecipherable messages which they believed came from that direction. Through the years the story has grown, until today they are convinced a race of intellectual giants will be found in that spiral arm. And there is always pressure to probe deeper into the galactic core. You must realize that we have only started. The galaxy still is largely unexplored. The thousands of races who form Galactic Central still are pioneers."

"You sound," said Enoch, "as if you have little hope of maintaining this station."

"Almost no hope at all," Ulysses told him. "But so far as you yourself are concerned, there will be an option. You can stay here and live out an ordinary life on Earth or you can be assigned to another station. Galactic Central hopes that you would elect to continue on with us."

Enoch sat numb and stricken. Bad news! It was worse than that. It was the crashing down of not only his own personal world, but of all the hopes of Earth. With the station gone, Earth once more would be left in the backwaters of the galaxy, with no hope of help, no chance of recognition, no realization of what lay waiting in the galaxy. Standing alone and naked, the human race would go on in its same old path, fumbling its uncertain way toward a blind, mad future.

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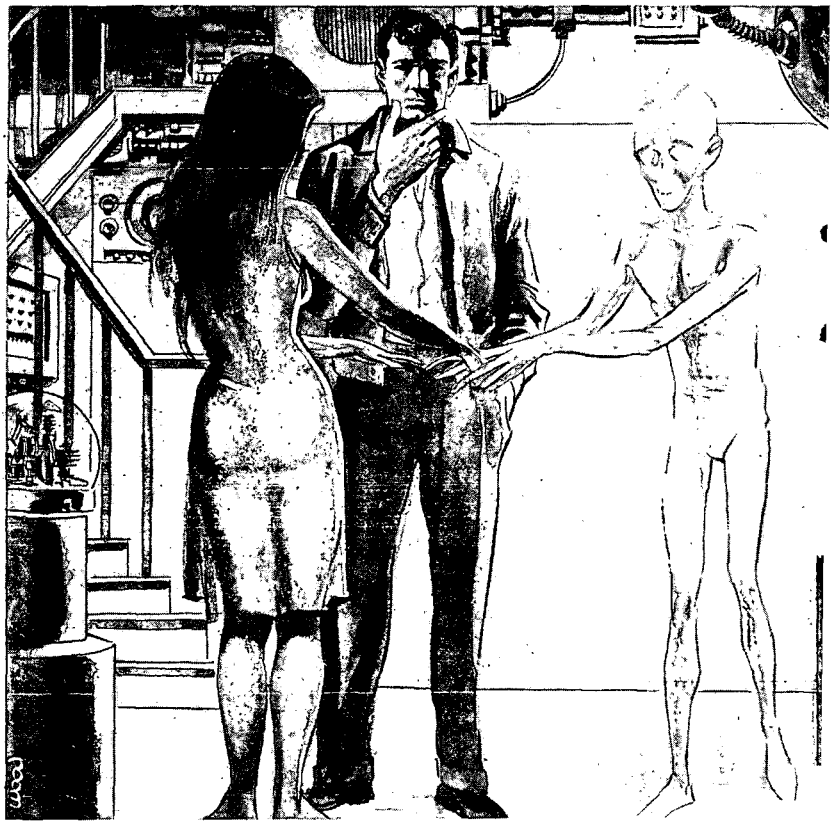

XVII

THE Hazer was elderly. The golden haze that enveloped him had lost the sparkle of its youthfulness. It was a mellow glow, deep and rich — not the blinding haze of a younger being. He carried himself with a solid dignity and the flaring topknot that was neither hair nor feathers was a saintly white. His face was soft and tender, the softness and the tenderness which in a man might have been expressed in kindly wrinkles.

"I am sorry," he told Enoch, "that our meeting must be such as this. Although, under any circumstances, I am glad to meet you. I have heard of you. It is not often that a being of an outside planet is the keeper of a station. Because of this, young be-

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ing, I have been intrigued with you. I have wondered what sort of creature you might turn out to be."

"You need have no apprehension of him," Ulysses said, a little sharply. "I will vouch for him. We have been friends for years."

"Yes, I forgot," the Hazer said. "You are his discoverer."

He peered around the room. "Another one," he said. "I did not know there were two of them. I only knew of one."

"It's a friend of Enoch's," Ulysses said.

"There has been contact, then. Contact with the planet."

"No, there has been no contact."

"Perhaps an indiscretion."

"Perhaps," Ulysses said, "but under provocation that I doubt either you or I could have stood against."

Lucy had risen to her feet and now she came across the room, moving quietly and slowly, as if she might be floating.

The Hazer spoke to her in the common tongue. "I am very glad to meet you."

"She cannot speak," Ulysses said. "She has no communication."

"Compensation," said the Hazer.

"You think so?" asked Ulysses.

"I am sure of it."

He walked slowly forward and Lucy waited.

"It — she, the female form, you called it — she is not afraid."

Ulysses chuckled. "Not even of me," he said.

The Hazer reached out his hand to her and she stood quietly for a moment, then one hand came up and took the Hazer's fingers, more like tentacles than fingers, in her grasp.

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IT seemed to Enoch that the cloak of golden haze reached out to wrap the Earth girl in its glow. Enoch blinked and the illusion, if it had been illusion, was swept away; only the Hazer had the golden cloak.

And how was it, Enoch wondered, that there was no fear in her, either of Ulysses or the Hazer? Was it because she could see beyond the outward guise to sense their basic humanity? (God help me, I cannot think, even now, except in human terms!) And if that were true, was it because she, herself, was not entirely human?

Lucy dropped the Hazer's hand and went back to the sofa.

The Hazer said: "Enoch Wallace."

"Yes."

"She is of your race?"

"Yes, of course."

"She is most unlike you. Almost as if there were two races on your planet."

"There is only one."

"Are there many others like her?"

"I would not know," said Enoch.

"Coffee," said Ulysses to the Hazer. "Would you like some coffee?"

"Coffee?"

"A most delicious brew. Earth's one great accomplishment."

"I am not acquainted with it," said the Hazer. "I don't believe I will."

He turned ponderously to Enoch.

"You know why I am here?" he asked. "It is a matter I regret, but I must . . ."

"If you'd rather," Enoch said, "we can consider that the protest has been made. I would so stipulate."

"Why not?" Ulysses said. "There is no need, it seems to me, to have the three of us go through a somewhat painful scene."

The Hazer hesitated.

"If you feel you must," said Enoch.

"No," the Hazer said. "I am satisfied if an unspoken protest be generously accepted."

"Accepted," Enoch said, "on just one condition. That I satisfy myself that the charge is not unfounded. I must go out and see."

"You do not believe me?"

"It is not a matter of belief. It is something that can be checked. I cannot accept either for myself or for my planet until I have done that much."

"Enoch," Ulysses said, "the Vegan has been gracious. Not only now, but before this happened. His race presses the charge most reluctantly. They suffered much to protect the Earth and you."

"And the feeling is that I would be ungracious if I did not accept

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the protest and the charge on the Vegan statement."

"I am sorry, Enoch," said Ulysses. "That is what I mean."

ENOCH shook his head. "For years I've tried to understand and to conform to the ethics and ideas of all the people who have come through this station. I've pushed my own human instincts and training to one side. I've tried to understand other viewpoints and to evaluate other ways of thinking, many of which did violence to my own. I am glad of all of it, for it has given me a chance to go beyond the narrowness of Earth. I think I gained something from it all. But none of this touched Earth; only myself was involved. This business touches Earth and I must approach it from an Earthman's viewpoint. In this particular instance I am not simply the keeper of a galactic station."

Neither of them said a word. Enoch stood waiting and still there was nothing said.

Finally he turned and headed for the door.

"I'll be back," he told them.

He spoke the phrase and the door started to slide open.

"If you'll have me," said Hazer, quietly, "I'd like to go with you."

"Fine," said Enoch. "Come ahead."

It was dark outside and Enoch lit the lantern. The Hazer watched him closely.

"Fossil fuel," Enoch told him. "It burns at the tip of a saturated wick."

The Hazer said, in horror: "But surely you have better."

"Much better now. I am just old-fashioned."

He led the way outside, the lantern throwing a small pool of light. The Hazer followed.

"It is a wild planet," said the Hazer.

"Wild here. There are parts of it are tame."

"My own planet is controlled," the Hazer said. "Every foot of it is planned."

"I know. I have talked to many Vegans. They described the planet to me."

They headed for the barn.

"You want to go back?" asked Enoch.

"No," said the Hazer. "I find it exhilarating. Those are wild plants over there?"

"We call them trees," said Enoch.

"The wind blows as it wishes?"

"That's right," said Enoch. "We do not as yet control the weather."

The spade stood just inside the barn door and Enoch picked it up. He headed for the orchard.

"You know, of course," the Hazer said, "the body will be gone."

"I'm prepared to find it gone."

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"Then why?" the Hazer asked.

"Because I must be sure. You can't understand that, can you?"

"You said back there in the station," the Hazer said, "that you tried to understand the rest of us. Perhaps, for a change, at least one of us should try understanding you."

ENOCH led the way down the path through the orchard. They came to the rude fence enclosing the burial plot. The sagging gate stood open. Enoch went through it and the Hazer followed.

"This is where you buried him?"

"This is my family plot. My mother and my father are here and I put him with them."

He handed the lantern to the Vegan and, armed with the spade, walked up to the grave. He thrust the spade into the ground.

"Would you hold the lantern a little closer, please?"

The Hazer moved up a step or two.

Enoch dropped to his knees and brushed away the leaves that had fallen on the ground. Underneath them was the soft, fresh earth that had been newly turned. There was a depression and a small hole at the bottom of the depression. As he brushed at the earth, he could hear the clods of displaced dirt falling through the hole and striking on something that was not the soil.

The Hazer had moved the lantern again and he could not see. But he did not need to see. He knew there was no use of digging; he knew what he would find. He should have kept a watch. He should not have put up the stone to attract attention. But Galactic Central had said "as if he were your own," and that was the way he'd done it.

He felt the damp of the earth soaking through his trousers.

"No one told me," said the Hazer softly.

"Told you what?"

"The memorial. And what is written on it. I was not aware that you knew our language."

"I learned it long ago. There were scrolls I wished to read. I'm afraid it's not too good."

"Two misspelled words," the Hazer told him, "and one little awkwardness. But those are things which do not matter. What matters, very much, is that when you wrote you thought as one of us."

Enoch rose and reached out for the lantern.

"Let's go back," he said sharply. "I know now who did this. I have to hunt him out."

THE treetops far above moaned in the rising wind. Ahead, the great clump of canoe birch

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showed whitely in the dim glow of the lantern's light. The birch clump, Enoch knew, grew on the lip of a small cliff that dropped twenty feet or more and here one turned to the right to get around it and continue down the hillside.

Enoch turned slightly and glanced at Lucy, following close behind. She smiled at him. He gestured to indicate that they must turn to the right, that she must follow closely. Although it wasn't necessary; she knew the hillside better than he himself.

He turned along the edge of the cliff, came to the break and clambered down to reach the slope below. Off to the left he could hear the swiftly-running creek that tumbled down the ravine from the spring below the field.

The hillside plunged more steeply now and he led a way that angled across it.

Even in the darkness he could recognize the white oak that twisted at a crazy angle above the hill; the small grove of massive red oaks that grew out of a dome of tumbled rock, so placed that no axeman had even tried to cut them down; the tiny swamp, filled with cattails, that fitted itself snugly into a little terrace carved into the hillside.

Far below he caught the gleam of window light.

They came to a rude fence of poles and crawled through it. Now the ground became more level. Somewhere a dog barked in the dark and another joined him. More joined in, and the pack came sweeping up toward them. They arrived in a rush of feet, veered around Enoch and the lantern to launch themselves at Lucy — suddenly transformed, at the sight of her, into a welcoming committee rather than a company of guards. Enoch led the way across a vegetable garden carefully following a path between the rows. Then they were in the yard and the house stood before them, a tumbledown, sagging structure, its kitchen windows glowing with lamplight.

THE door opened. Ma Fisher stood framed against the light, a great, tall, bony woman clothed in something that was more sack than dress.

She stared at Enoch, half frightened, half belligerent. Then back of him she saw the girl.

"Lucy!" she cried.

The girl came forward with a rush and her mother caught her in her arms.

Enoch set his lantern on the ground, tucked the rifle underneath his arm and stepped across the threshold.

The family had been at supper, seated about a great round table set in the center of the kitchen.

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An ornate oil lamp stood in the center of the table. Hank had risen to his feet, but his three sons and the stranger still were seated.

"So you brung her back," said Hank.

"I found her," Enoch said.

"We quit hunting for her just a while ago," Hank told him. "We was going out again."

"You remember what you told me this afternoon?" asked Enoch.

"I told you a lot of things."

"You told me that I had the devil in me. Raise your hand against that girl once more and I promise you I'll show you just how much devil there is in me."

"You can't bluff me," Hank blustered.

But the man was frightened. It showed in the limpness of his face, the tightness of his body.

"I mean it," Enoch said. "Just try me out and see."

The two men stood for a moment, facing one another, then Hank sat down.

"Would you join us in some victuals?" he inquired.

Enoch shook his head.

He looked at the stranger. "Are you the ginseng man?" he asked.

The man nodded. "That is what they call me."

"I want to talk with you. Outside."

Claude Lewis stood up.

"You don't have to go," said Hank. "He can't make you go. He can talk to you right here."

"I don't mind," said Lewis. "In fact, I want to talk with him. You're Enoch Wallace, aren't you?"

"That's who he is," said Hank. "Should of died of old age fifty years ago. But look at him. He's got the devil in him. I tell you, him and the devil has a deal."

"Hank," Lewis said, "shut up."

Lewis came around the table and went out the door.

"Good night," Enoch said to the rest of them.

"Mr. Wallace," said Ma Fisher, "thanks for bringing back my girl. Hank won't hit her again, I can promise you. I'll see to that."

Enoch went outside and shut the door. He picked up the lantern. Lewis was out in the yard. Enoch went to him.

"Let's walk off a ways," he said.

THEY stopped at the edge of the garden and turned to face one another.

"You been watching me," said Enoch.

Lewis nodded.

"Official? Or just snooping?"

"Official, I'm afraid. My name is Claude Lewis. There is no reason I shouldn't tell you. I'm CIA."

"I'm not a traitor or a spy," Enoch said.

"No one thinks you are. We're

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just watching you. You can imagine why, I expect."

"You know about the cemetery?"

Lewis nodded.

"You took something from a grave."

"Yes," said Lewis. "The one with the funny headstone."

"Where is it?"

"You mean the body. It's in Washington."

"You shouldn't have taken it," Enoch said, grimly. "You've caused a lot of trouble. You have to get it back as quickly as you can."

"It will take a little time," said Lewis. "They'll have to fly it out. Twenty-four hours, maybe."

"That's the fastest you can make it?"

"I might do a little better."

"Do the very best you can. It's important that you get that body back."

"I will, Wallace. I didn't know it would be important."

"And, Lewis."

"Yes."

"Don't try to play it smart. Don't add any frills. Just do what I tell you. I'm trying to be reasonable because that's the only thing to be. But you try one smart move . . ."

He reached out a hand and grabbed Lewis' shirt front, twisting the fabric tight. "You understand me, Lewis?"

Lewis was unmoved. He did not try to pull away. "I had a job," he said.

"Yeah, a job. Watching me. Not robbing graves." He let loose of the shirt.

"Tell me," said Lewis, "that thing in the grave. What was it?"

"That's none of your damn business," Enoch told him, bitterly. "Getting back that body is. It's most important thing you've ever done. Don't forget that for a minute. It affects everyone on Earth. You and I and everyone. And if you fail, you'll answer to me for it."

"Wallace, is there something you can tell me?"

"Not a thing," said Enoch. He picked up the lantern, turned, went across the garden and started up the hill.

In the yard, Lewis stood for a long time, watching the lantern bobbing out of sight.

XVIII

ULYSSES was alone in the station when Enoch returned. He had sent the Thuban on his way and the Hazer back to Vega.

A fresh pot of coffee was brewing and Ulysses was sprawled out on the sofa, doing nothing.

Enoch hung up the rifle and blew out the lantern. Taking off his jacket, he threw it on the desk. He sat down in a chair

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across from the sofa.

"The body will be back," he said, "by this time tomorrow."

"I sincerely hope," Ulysses said, "that it will do some good. But I'm inclined to doubt it."

Said Enoch bitterly, "Maybe I should not have bothered."

"It will show good faith," Ulysses said. "It might have some mitigating effect in the final weighing."

"The Hazer could have told me," Enoch said, "where the body was. If he knew it had been taken from the grave, then he must have known where it could be found."

"I would suspect he did," Ulysses said. "But, you see, he couldn't tell you. All that he could do was to make his protest. The rest was up to you."

"Sometimes this business is enough to drive one crazy."

"There may come a day," Ulysses said, "when it won't be like that. I can look ahead and see, in some thousands of years, the knitting of the galaxy together into one great culture, one huge area of understanding. The local and the racial variations still will exist, of course, and that is as it should be, but overriding all of these will be a tolerance that will make for what one might be tempted to call a brotherhood."

Enoch said, "You sound almost like a human."

THE COFFEE pot was making sounds. Enoch went to get it. Ulysses had pushed some of the trinkets on the coffee table to one side to make room for two coffee cups. Enoch filled them and set the pot upon the floor.

Ulysses picked up his cup, held it for a moment in his hands, then put it back on the table top.

"We're in bad shape," he said. "Not like in the old days. It has Galactic Central worried. All this squabbling and haggling among the races, all the pushing and the shoving."

He looked at Enoch. "You thought it was all nice and cozy."

"No," said Enoch, "not that. But I'm afraid I thought of the conflicts as being on a fairly lofty plane. Gentlemanly, you know. Good mannered."

"That was the way it was at one time. There always have been differing opinions, but they were based on principles and ethics, not on special interests. You know about the spiritual force, of course. The universal spiritual force."

Enoch nodded. "I've read some of the literature. I don't quite understand, but I'm willing to accept it. There is a way, I know, to get in contact with the force."

"The Talisman," said Ulysses.

"That's it. The Talisman. A machine, of sorts."

"I suppose," Ulysses agreed,

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"you could call it that. Although machine is a little awkward. More than sheer mechanics went into the making of it. There is just the one. Only one was ever made, by a being who lived ten thousand of your years ago. I wish I could tell you what it is or how it is constructed, but there is no one, I am afraid, who can tell you that. There have been others who have attempted to duplicate the Talisman, but no one has succeeded. The mystic who made it left no blueprints, no plans, no specifications, not a single note. There is no one who knows anything about it."

"There is no reason, I suppose," said Enoch, "that another should not be made. No sacred taboos, I mean. To make another one would not be sacrilegious."

"Not in the least," Ulysses told him. "In fact, we need another badly. For now we have no Talisman. It has disappeared."

Enoch jerked upright in his chair.

"Disappeared?" he asked.

"Lost," said Ulysses. "Misplaced. Stolen. No one knows."

"But I hadn't . . ."

Ulysses smiled bleakly. "It's a strange business," he said. "The Talisman has been missing for several years or so, and no one knows about it — except Galactic Central and the — what would you call it? The hierarchy, I suppose. The organization of mystics. And yet, even with no one knowing, the galaxy is beginning to show wear. It's coming apart at the seams. In time to come, it may fall apart. As if the Talisman represented a force that all unknowingly held the races of the galaxy together, exerting its influence even when it remained unseen."

"But even if it's lost, it's somewhere," Enoch pointed out. "It still would be exerting its influence. It couldn't have been destroyed."

"You forget," Ulysses reminded him, "that without its proper custodian it is inoperative. The machine merely acts as an intermediary between the sensitive and the force. It is an extension of the sensitive."

THEY SAT in silence for a moment, listening to the soft sound that the wind made as it blew through the gable gingerbread.

"You really think relations in the galaxy are deteriorating because of this?"

"Once," Ulysses said, "the races all were bound together. There were differences, naturally, but these differences were bridged. Both sides wanted them bridged, you see. There was a common purpose, the forging of a great confraternity of all intelligences. We realized that among us we

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had a staggering fund of knowledge and techniques. Working together, putting together all this knowledge and capability, we could arrive at something that would be far greater and more significant than any race, alone, could hope of accomplishing. We had our troubles and our differences, but we were progressing. We brushed the small animosities and the petty differences underneath the rug and worked only on the big ones. We felt that if we could get the big ones settled, the small ones would become so small they would disappear. But it is becoming different now. There is a tendency to pull the pettiness from underneath the rug and blow it beyond its size."

"It sounds like Earth," said Enoch.

"In many ways," Ulysses said. "In principle, although the circumstances would diverge immensely."

"You've been reading the papers I have been saving for you?"

Ulysses nodded. "It doesn't look too happy."

"It looks like war," said Enoch bluntly.

Ulysses stirred uneasily.

"You don't have wars," said Enoch.

"The galaxy, you mean. No, as we are set up now we don't have wars."

"Too civilized?"

"Stop being bitter," Ulysses told him. "There has been a time or two when we came very close, but not in recent years. There are many races now in the confraternity that in their formative years had a history of war."

"There is hope for us, then. It's something you outgrow."

"In time, perhaps."

"But not a certainty?"

"No, I wouldn't say so."

"I've been working on a chart," said Enoch. "Based on the Mizar system of statistics. The chart says there is going to be war."

"You don't need the chart," Ulysses said, "to tell you that."

"But there was something else. It was not just knowing if there'd be a war. I had hoped that the chart might show how to keep the peace. There must be a way. If we could only think of it or know where to look or whom to ask or . . ."

"There is a way," Ulysses said.

"You mean you know . . ."

"It's drastic. A last resort."

"And we've not reached that last resort?"

"Perhaps you have. The kind of war that Earth would fight could spell an end to everything but the feeble remnants of civilizations. It could, just possibly, eliminate life upon the planet."

"This method of yours — it has been used?"

"A few times."

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"And worked?"

"Oh, certainly. We'd not even consider it if it didn't work."

"It could be used on Earth?"

"You could apply for it."

"I?"

"As a representative of the Earth. To gain a hearing, you must know about Galactic Central and you're the only man of Earth who does. Besides, your record has been good. We would listen to you."

"But one man alone! One man can't speak for an entire race. If I could consult some others — "

"Who would believe you?"

"That's true," said Enoch.

Of course it was. To him there was no longer any strangeness in the idea of a galactic confraternity, of a transportation network that spread among the stars — but tell it to any other Earthman and it would sound like madness.

"And this method?" he asked, almost afraid to ask it.

"Stupidity," Ulysses said.

ENOCH gasped. "Stupidity? I don't understand. We are stupid enough, in many ways, right now."

"You're thinking of intellectual stupidity. What I am talking about is a mental incapacity. An inability to understand the science and the technique that makes possible the kind of war that Earth would fight. An inability to operate the machines that are necessary to fight that kind of war. Turning the people back to a mental position where they would not be able to comprehend the mechanical and technological and scientific advances they have made. Those who know would forget. Those who didn't know could never learn. Back to the simplicity of the wheel and lever. That would make your kind of war impossible."

Enoch sat stiff and straight, unable to speak.

"I told you it was drastic," Ulysses said.

"I couldn't!" Enoch said. "No one could."

"Perhaps you can't. But consider this: If there is a war . . ."

"I know. If there is a war, it could be worse. But it wouldn't stop war. It's not the kind of thing I had in mind. People still could fight, still could kill."

"With clubs," said Ulysses. "Maybe bows and arrows. Rifles, so long as they still had rifles, and until they ran out of ammunition. Then they wouldn't know how to make more powder or how to get the metal to make the bullets or even how to make the bullets. There might be fighting, but there'd be no holocaust. Cities would not be wiped out by nuclear warheads, for no one could fire a rocket or arm the warhead

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— perhaps wouldn't even know what a rocket or a warhead was."

"It would be terrible," Enoch said.

"So is war," Ulysses said.

"But how long?" asked Enoch. "How long would it last? We wouldn't have to go back to stupidity forever?"

"Several generations," said Ulysses. "By that time the effect would gradually begin wearing off. The people slowly would shake off their moronic state and and begin their intellectual climb again. They'd be given a second chance."

"They could," said Enoch, "in a few generations after that arrive at exactly the same situation that we have today."

"Possibly."

"It's too much for one man . . ."

"Something hopeful," Ulysses said, "that you might consider. The method is offered only to those races which seem to us to be worth the saving."

"You have to give me time," said Enoch.

But he knew there was no time.

XIX

A LONG time later he roused himself, shook his head and reached for the rifle on the peg.

He needed something to take his mind off what Ulysses had said. And he needed the target practice. It had been too long since he'd been on the rifle range. He spoke the word, and watched the wall slide back, and clumped down the stairs to the basement.

The basement was huge. It stretched out into a dim haze beyond the lights which he had turned on, a place of tunnels and rooms, carved deep into the rock that folded up to underlie the ridge.

Here were the massive tanks filled with the various solutions for the tank travelers; here the pumps and the generators, which operated on a principle alien to the human manner of generating electric power, and far beneath the floor of the basement itself those great storage tanks which held the acids and the soupy matter which once had been the creatures which came traveling to the station, leaving behind them, as they went on to some other place, the useless bodies which then must be disposed of.

Enoch moved across the floor, past the tanks and generators, until he came to a gallery that stretched out into the darkness. He found the panel and pressed it to bring on the lights, then walked down the gallery. On either side were metal shelves which had been installed to accommodate the overflow of gadgets, of artifacts, of all sorts of gifts which had been brought him by

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the travelers. From floor to ceiling the shelves were jammed with a junkyard accumulation from all the corners of the galaxy. And yet, thought Enoch, perhaps not actually a junkyard, for very little of this stuff was actual junk. All of it was serviceable and had some purpose, either practical or aesthetic, if only that purpose could be learned. Although perhaps not in every instance a purpose that would be applicable to humans.

Down at the end of the shelves was one section of shelving into which the articles were packed more systematically and with greater care, each one tagged and numbered, with cross-filing to a card catalogue and certain journal dates. These were the articles of which he knew the purpose and, in certain instances, something of the principles involved. There were some that were innocent enough and others that held great potential value and still others that had, at the moment, no connection whatsoever with the human way of life — and there were a few, tagged in red, that made one shudder to even think upon.

He went down the gallery, his footsteps echoing loudly as he trod through this place of alien ghosts.

Finally the gallery widened into an oval room. Here the walls were padded with a thick gray substance that would entrap a bullet and prevent a ricochet.

Enoch walked over to a panel set inside a deep recess, sunk into the wall. He reached in and thumbed up a tumbler, then stepped quickly out into the center of the room.

Slowly the room began to darken. Then suddenly it seemed to flare — and he was in the room no longer, but in another place, a place he had never seen before.

HE STOOD on a little hillock. In front of him the land sloped down to a sluggish river bordered by marsh. Between the beginning of the marsh and the foot of the hillock stretched a sea of rough, tall grass. There was no wind, but the grass was rippling. He knew that the rippling motion was caused by many moving bodies, foraging in the grass. Out of it came a savage grunting, as if a thousand angry hogs were fighting for choice swill. And from somewhere farther off, perhaps from the river, came a deep, monotonous bellowing that sounded hoarse and tired.

Enoch felt the hair crawling on his scalp and he thrust the rifle out and ready. It was puzzling. He felt and knew the danger, though as yet there was no danger. Still, the very air of this place — wherever it might be — seemed

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to crawl with danger like a dank, miasmic fog.

He spun around. Close behind him the thick, dark woods climbed down the range of river hills, stopping at the sea of grass which flowed around the hillock on which he found himself. Off beyond the hills loomed a range of mighty mountains that seemed to fade into the sky, purple to their peaks, with no sign of snow upon them.

Two things came trotting from the woods and stopped at the edge of it. They sat down and grinned at him, with their tails wrapped neatly round their feet. They might have been wolves or dogs, but they were neither one. They were nothing he had ever seen or heard of. Their pelts glistened in the weak sunshine, as if they had been greased, but the pelts stopped at their necks, with their skulls and faces bare. Like evil old men, off on a masquerade, with their bodies draped in the hides of wolves. But the disguise was spoiled by the lolling tongues which spilled out of their mouths, glistening scarlet against the bone-white of their faces.

The wood was still. There were only the two gaunt beasts sitting on their haunches. They sat and grinned at him, a strangely toothless grin.

The wood was dark and tangled, the foliage so dark green that it was almost black. All the leaves shone as if they had been polished.

Enoch spun around again, to look back toward the river. Crouched at the edge of the grass was a line of toad-like monstrosities, six feet long and standing three feet high, their bodies the color of a dead fish belly, and each with a single eye, or what seemed to be an eye, which covered a great part of the area just above the snout. The eyes were faceted and glowed in the dim sunlight, as the eyes of a hunting cat will glow when caught in a beam of light.

The hoarse bellowing still came from the river and in between the bellowing there was a faint, thin buzzing, angry and malicious, as if a giant mosquito might be hovering for attack.

Enoch jerked up his head to look into the sky and far in the depths of it he saw a string of dots, so high that there was no way of knowing what kind of things they were. From the corner of his eye he caught the sense of flowing motion and swung back toward the woods.

THE WOLF-LIKE bodies with the skull-like heads were coming up the hill in a silent rush.

They did not seem to run. There was no motion of their running. Rather they were moving

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as if they had been squirted from a tube.

Enoch jerked up his rifle and it came into his shoulder, fitting as if it were a part of him. The bead settled in the rear-sight notch and blotted out the skull-like face of the leading beast. The gun bucked as he squeezed the trigger and, without waiting to see if the shot had downed the beast, the rifle barrel was swinging toward the second as his right fist worked the bolt. The rifle bucked again and the second wolf-like being somersaulted and slid forward for an instant, then began rolling down the hill, flopping limply as it rolled.

Enoch worked the bolt again and the spent brass case glittered in the sun as he turned swiftly to face the other slope.

The toad-like things were closer now. They had been creeping in, but as he turned they stopped and squatted, staring mindlessly at him.

He reached a hand into his pocket and took out two cartridges, cramming them into the magazine to replace the shells he'd fired.

The bellowing down by the river had stopped, but now there was a honking sound that he could not place. Turning cautiously, he tried to locate what might be making it, but there was nothing to be seen. The honking sound seemed to be coming from the forest, but there was nothing moving.

In between the honking, he still could hear the buzzing and it seemed louder now. He glanced into the sky and the dots were larger and no longer in a line. They had formed into a circle and seemed to be spiraling downward, but they were still so high that he could not make out what kinds of things they were.

He glanced back toward the toad-like monsters and they were closer than they had been before. They had crept up again.

Enoch lifted the rifle and, before it reached his shoulder, pressed the trigger, shooting from the hip. The eye of one of the foremost of them exploded, like the splash a stone would make if thrown into water. The creature did not jump or flop. It simply settled down, flat upon the ground, as if someone had put his foot upon it and had exerted exactly force enough to squash it flat. It lay there, flat, a big round hole where the eye had been. The hole was filling with a thick and ropy yellow fluid that might have been the creature's blood.

The others backed watchfully away, all the way off the hillock, and only stopped when they reached the grass edge.

The honking was closer and the buzzing louder. There could

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be no doubt that the honking was coming from the hills.

ENOCH SWUNG about and saw it, striding through the sky, coming down the ridge, stepping through the trees and honking dolefully. It was a round and black balloon that swelled and deflated with its honking. It jerked and swayed as it walked along, hung from the center of four stiff and spindly legs that arched above it to the joint that connected this upper portion of the leg arrangement with the downward-spraddling legs that raised it high above the forest. It was walking jerkily, lifting its legs high to clear the massive treetops before putting them down again. Each time it put down a foot, Enoch could hear the crunching of the branches and the crashing of the trees that it broke or brushed aside.

Enoch felt the skin along his spine trying to roll up his back like a window shade, and the bristling of the hair along the base of his skull, obeying some primordial instinct in its striving to raise itself erect into a fighting ruff.

But even as he stood there, almost stiff with fright, some part of his brain remembered that one shot he had fired. His fingers dug into his pocket for another cartridge to fill the magazine.

The buzzing was much louder and the pitch had changed; now it was approaching at tremendous speed.

Enoch jerked up his head. The dots no longer were circling in the sky, but were plunging down toward him, one behind the other.

He flicked a glance toward the balloon, honking and jerking on its stilt-like legs. It still was coming on, but the plunging dots were faster and would reach the hillock first.

He shifted the rifle forward, outstretched and ready to slap against his shoulder, and watched the falling creatures. They were dots no longer, but hideous streamlined bodies, each carrying a rapier that projected from its head. A bill of sorts, thought Enoch, for these things might be birds; but longer, thinner, larger, more deadly than any Earthly bird.

The buzzing changed into a scream and the scream kept mounting up the scale until it set the teeth on edge. Through it, like a metronome measuring a beat, came the hooting of the black balloon that strode across the hills.

Without knowing that he had moved his arms, Enoch had the rifle at his shoulder, waiting for that instant when the first of the plunging monsters was close enough to fire.

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They dropped like stones out of the sky. They were bigger than he had thought they were — big and coming like arrows aimed directly at him.

The rifle thudded against his shoulder. The first one crumpled, lost its arrow shape, folding up and falling, no longer on its course. He worked the bolt and fired again; and the second one in line lost its balance and began to tumble — and the bolt was worked once more and the trigger pressed. The third skidded in the air and went off at a slant, limp and ragged, fluttering in the wind, falling toward the river.

The rest broke off their dive. They made a shallow turn and beat their way up into the sky, great wings like windmill vanes threshing desperately.

A SHADOW fell across the hillock and a mighty pillar came down from somewhere overhead, driving down to strike to one side of the hillock. The ground trembled at the tread, and the water that lay hidden by the grass squirted high into the air.

The honking blotted out all else and the great balloon was zooming down on him, cradled on the enormous legs.

Enoch saw the face, if anything so grotesque and so obscene could be called a face. There was a beak and beneath it a sucking mouth and a dozen or so other organs that might have been the eyes.

The legs were like inverted Vs, with the inner stroke somewhat shorter than the outer. And in the center of these inner joints hung the great balloon that was the body of the creature, with its face on the underside so that it could see all the hunting territory that might lie beneath it.

But now auxiliary joints in the outer span of legs were bending to let the body of the creature down so it could seize its prey.

Enoch was not conscious of putting up the rifle or of operating it, but it was hammering at his shoulder. It seemed to him that a second part of him stood off, apart, and watched the firing of the rifle — as if the figure that held and fired the weapon might be a second man.

Great gouts of flesh flew out of the black balloon. Jagged rents suddenly tore across it, and from these rents poured out a cloud of liquid that turned into a mist, with black droplets raining from it.

The firing pin clicked on an empty breech and the gun was empty, but there was no need of another shot.

The great legs were folding, trembling as they folded. The shrunken body shivered convulsively in the heavy mist that was

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pouring out of it. There was no hooting now. Enoch could hear the patter of the black drops falling from that cloud, as they struck the short grass on the hill.

There was a sickening odor. The drops where they fell on him were sticky, running like cold oil; and above him the great structure that had been the stilt-like creature was toppling to the ground.

Then the world faded swiftly and was no longer there.

Enoch stood in the oval room in the faint glow of the bulbs. There was the heavy smell of powder and all about his feet, glinting in the light, lay the spent and shining cases that had been kicked out of the gun.

He was back in the basement once again. The target shoot was over.

ENOCH LOWERED the rifle and drew in a slow and careful breath. It always was like this, he thought. As if it were necessary for him to ease himself, by slow degrees, back to this world after the season of unreality.

He knew that it would be illusion when he kicked on the switch that set into motion whatever was to happen, and he knew it had been illusion when it all had ended. But during the time that it was happening it was not illusion. It was as real and as substantial as if it all were true.

They had asked him, he remembered, when the station had been built, if he had a hobby — if there was any sort of recreational facility they could build into the station for him. And he had said that he would like a rifle range, expecting no more than a shooting gallery with ducks moving on a chain or clay pipes rotating on a wheel. But that, of course, would have been too simple for the screwball architects who had designed, and the slaphappy crew of tentacled workmen who had built, the galactic way station.

At first they had not been certain what he meant by a rifle range. He had to tell them how a rifle operated and for what it might be used. He had told them about hunting squirrels on sunny autumn mornings and shaking rabbits out of brushpiles with the first coming of the snow (although one did not use a rifle, but a shotgun, on the rabbits), about hunting coons of an autumn night, and waiting for the deer along the run that went down to the river. But he was dishonest. He did not tell them about that other use to which he'd put a rifle during four long years.

He'd told them (since they were easy folks to talk with) about his youthful dream of some day going on a hunt in Africa, although even as he told them he

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well aware of how unattainable it was.

But since that day he'd hunted (and been hunted by) beasts far stranger than anything that Africa could boast.

From what these beasts might have been patterned, if indeed they came from anywhere other than the imagination of those aliens who had set up the tapes which produced the target scene, he had no idea. There had so far, in the thousands of times that he had used the range, not been a duplication either in the scene nor in the beasts which rampaged about the scene. Although, perhaps, he thought, there might, somewhere, be an end of them, and then the whole sequence might start over and run its course once more. But it would make little difference now, for if the tapes should start rerunning there'd be but little chance of his recalling in any considerable detail those adventures he had lived so many years ago.

HE DID not understand the techniques or the principle which made possible this fantastic rifle range. Like many other things, he accepted it without the need of understanding. Although, some day, he thought, he might find the clue which in time would turn blind acceptance into understanding — not only of the range, but of many other equally wonderful things.

He had often wondered what the aliens might think about his fascination with the rifle range, with that primal force that drove a man to kill, not for the joy of killing so much as to negate a danger, to meet force with a greater and more skillful force, cunning with more cunning. Had he, he wondered, given his alien friends concern in their assessment of the human character by his preoccupation with the rifle? For the understanding of an alien, how could one draw a line between the killing of other forms of life and the killing of one's own? Was there actually a difference that would stand up under logical examination between the sport of hunting and the sport of war? To an alien, perhaps, such a differentiation would be rather difficult, for in many cases the hunted animal would be more closely allied to the human hunter in its form and characteristics than would many of the aliens.

Was war an instinctive thing, for which each ordinary man was as much responsible as the policy makers and the so-called statesmen? It seemed impossible. Yet deep in every man was the combative instinct, the aggressive urge, the strange sense of competition — all of which spelled conflict of one kind or another if

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carried to its logical, inevitable conclusion.

He put the rifle underneath his arm and walked over to the panel. Sticking from a slot in the bottom of it was a piece of tape.

He pulled it out and puzzled out the symbols. They were not reassuring. He had not done so well.

He had missed that first shot he had fired at the charging wolf-thing with the old man's face, and back there somewhere, in that dimension of unreality, it and its companion were snarling over the tangled, torn mass of ribboned flesh and broken bone that had been Enoch Wallace.

XX

HE WENT back through the gallery, with its gifts stacked there as other gifts, in regular human establishments, might be stacked away in dry and dusty attics. It was, he thought, the packrat instinct that he had which had never let him bring himself to throw them away. Although, even if he could, it would have been impossible to throw any of this collection of stuff away. It would never do to put in the reach of other humans any single item which rested on the shelves.

The tape nagged at him, the little piece of tape which said that while he had made all his other shots, he had missed that first one back there on the hillock. It was not often that he missed. And his training had been for that very type of shooting — the you-never-know-what-will-happen-next, the totally unexpected, the kill-or-be-killed kind of shooting that thousands of expeditions into the target area had taught him. Perhaps he had not been as faithful in his practice lately as he should have been.

Near the end of the gallery he saw the black bulk of a trunk projecting from beneath the lower shelf, too big to fit comfortably beneath it, jammed against the wall, but with a foot or two of it still projecting out beyond the shelf.

He went on walking past it, then suddenly turned around. That trunk, he thought. That was the trunk which had belonged to the Hazer who had died upstairs. It was his legacy from that being whose stolen body would be brought back to its grave this evening.

He walked over to the shelving and leaned his rifle against the wall. Stooping, he pulled the trunk clear of its resting place.

Once before, prior to carrying it down the stairs and storing it here beneath the shelves, he had gone through its contents, but at the time he'd not been too interested. Now, suddenly, he felt an

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absorbing interest in what it might contain.

He lifted the lid carefully and tilted it back against the shelves.

Crouching above the open trunk, and without touching anything to start with, he tried to catalogue the upper layer of its contents.

THERE WAS a shimmering cloak, neatly folded. Perhaps it was some sort of ceremonial garment. Atop it lay a tiny bottle that was a blaze of reflected light, as if someone had taken a large diamond and hollowed it out to make a bottle of it. Beside the cloak lay a nest of balls, deep violet and dull, with no shine at all, looking for all the world like a bunch of table tennis balls that someone had cemented together to make a globe. But that was not the way it was, Enoch remembered; for that other time he had been entranced by them and had picked them up, to find that they were not cemented, but could be freely moved about, although never outside the context of their shape. One ball could not be broken from the mass, no matter how hard one might try, but would move about, as if buoyed in a fluid, among all the other balls. One could move any, or all, of the balls, but the mass remained the same.

A calculator of some sort, Enoch wondered? But that seemed only barely possible, for one ball was entirely like another; there was no way in which they could be identified. Or, at least, no way to identify them so far as concerned the human eye. Was it possible that identification might be possible to a Hazer's eye? And if a calculator, what kind of a calculator? Mathematical? Or ethical? Or philosophical? Perhaps a sort of game — a game of solitaire?

Given time a man might finally get it figured out. But there was no time and no incentive at the moment to spend upon one particular item any great amount of time when there were hundreds of other items equally fantastic and incomprehensible. For while one puzzled over a single item, the edges of his mind would always wonder if he might not be spending time on the most insignificant of the entire lot.

He was a victim of museum fatigue, Enoch told himself, overwhelmed by the many pieces of the unknown scattered all about him.

He reached out a hand, not for the globe of balls, but for the shining bottle that lay atop the cloak. As he picked it up and brought it closer, he saw that there was a line of writing engraved upon the glass (or diamond?) of the bottle. Slowly he

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studied out the meaning of the writing.

THERE HAD been a time, long ago, when he had been able to read the Hazer language, if not fluently, at least well enough to get along. But he had not read it for some years now and he had lost a good deal of it and he stumbled haltingly from one symbol to another. Translated very freely, the inscription on the bottle read: *To be taken when the first symptoms occur.*

A bottle of medicine! To be taken when the first symptoms occur. The symptoms, perhaps, that had come so quickly and built up so rapidly that the owner of this bottle could make no move to reach it and so had died, falling from the sofa.

Almost reverently, he put the bottle back in its place atop the cloak, fitting it back into the faint impression it had made from lying there.

So different from us in so many ways, thought Enoch, and then in other little ways so like us that it is frightening. For that bottle and the inscription on its face was an exact parallel of the prescription bottle from any corner drugstore.

Beside the globe of balls was a box, wood, with a simple clasp to hold it shut. He flipped back the lid and inside he saw the metallic sheen of the material the Hazers used as paper.

Carefully he lifted out the first sheet, and saw that it was a long strip of the material folded in accordion fashion. Underneath it were more strips, apparently, of the same material.

There was writing on it, faint and faded, and Enoch held it close to read it.

To my —, — friend: (although it was not friend. Blood brother, perhaps, or colleague. And the adjectives which preceded it were such as to escape his sense entirely.)

The writing was hard to read. It bore some resemblance to the formalized version of the language, but apparently bore the imprint of the writer's personality, expressed in curlicues and flourishes which obscured the form. Enoch worked his way slowly down the paper, missing much of what was there, but picking up the sense of much that had been written.

The writer had been on a visit to some other planet. While there he had performed some sort of function (although exactly what was not entirely clear) which had to do with his approaching death.

ENOCH, STARTLED, went back over the phrase again. And while much of the rest of what was written was not clear,

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that part of it was. *My approaching death,* he had written, and there was no room for mistranslation. The words were clear.

He urged that his good (friend?) do likewise. He said it was a comfort and made clear the road.

There was no further explanation, no further reference. Just the calm declaration that he had done something which he felt must be arranged about his death. As if he knew that death was near and was not only unafraid, but almost unconcerned.

The next passage (for there were no paragraphs) told about someone he had met and how they'd talked about a certain matter which made no sense at all to Enoch, lost in a terminology he did not recognize.

And then: *I am most concerned about the mediocrity* (incompetence? inability? weakness?) *of the recent custodian of* (and then that cryptic symbol which could be translated, roughly, as the Talisman.) *For* (a word, which from context, seemed to mean a great length of time), *ever since the death of the last custodian, the Talisman has been but poorly served. It has been, in all reality,* (another long time term), *since a true* (sensitive?) *has been found to carry out its purpose. Many have been tested and none has qualified, and for the lack of such a one the galaxy has lost its close identification with the ruling principle of life. We here at the* (temple? sanctuary?) *all are greatly concerned that without a proper linkage between the people and* (several words that were not decipherable) *the galaxy will go down in chaos* (and another line that he could not puzzle out.)

The next sentence introduced a new subject — the plans that were going forward for some cultural festival which concerned a concept that, to Enoch, was hazy at the best.

Enoch slowly folded up the letter and put it back into the box. He felt a faint uneasiness in reading what he had, as if he'd pried into a friendship that he had no right to know. *We here at the temple,* the letter had said. Perhaps the writer had been one of the Hazer mystics, writing to his old friend, the philosopher. And the other letters, quite possibly, were from that same mystic — letters that the dead old Hazer had valued so highly that he took them along with him when he went traveling.

A slight breeze seemed to be blowing across Enoch's shoulders; not actually a breeze, but a strange motion and a coldness to the air.

He glanced back into the gallery and there was nothing stir-

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ring to account for it, nothing to be seen.

The wind had quit its blowing, if it had ever blown. Here one moment, gone the next. Like a passing ghost, thought Enoch.

Did the Hazer have a ghost?

THE PEOPLE back on Vega XXI had known the moment he had died and all the circumstances of his death. They had known again about the body disappearing. And the letter had spoken calmly, much more calmly than would have been in the capacity of most humans, about the writer's near approach to death.

Was it possible that the Hazers knew more of life and death than most? Had it been spelled out in black and white in some depository in the galaxy?

Was the answer there? he wondered.

Squatting there, he thought that perhaps it might be, that someone already knew what life was for and what its destiny. There was a comfort in the thought, a strange sort of personal comfort in being able to believe that some intelligence might have solved the riddle of that mysterious equation of the universe.

Ulysses, he thought, had not told him all the truth about the Talisman. He had told him that it had disappeared and that the galaxy was without it, but he had not told him that for many years its power and glory had been dimmed by the failure of its custodian to provide a proper linkage between the people and the force. And all that time the corrosion occasioned by that failure had eaten away at the bonds of the galactic confraternity. Whatever might be happening now had not happened in the last few years; it had been building up for a longer time than most aliens would admit. Although, come to thing of it, most aliens probably did not know.

Enoch closed the box lid and put it back into the trunk. Some day, he thought, when he was in the proper frame of mind, when the pressure of events made him less emotional, when he could dull the guilt of prying, he would achieve a scholarly and conscientious translation of those letters. For in them, he felt certain, he might find further understanding of that intriguing race. He might, he thought, then be better able to gauge *their* humanity — not humanity in the sense of being a member of the human race of Earth, but in the sense that certain rules of conduct must underlie all racial concepts even as the thing called humanity in its narrow sense underlay the human concept.

He reached up to close the lid of the trunk and then he hesitated.

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SOME DAY, he had said. And there might not be a some day. It was a state of mind to be always thinking *some day*, a state of mind made possible by the conditions inside this station. For here there were endless days to come, forever and forever there were days to come. A man's concept of time was twisted out of shape and reason and he could look ahead complacently down a long, almost never-ending, avenue of time. But that might be all over now. Time might suddenly snap back into its rightful focus. Should he leave this station, the long procession of days to come would end.

He pushed back the lid again until it rested against the shelves. Reaching in, he lifted out the box and set it on the floor beside him. He'd take it upstairs, he told himself, and put it with the other stuff that he must be prepared immediately to take along with him if he should leave the station.

If? he asked himself. Was there a question any longer? Had he, somehow, made that hard decision? Had it crept upon him unaware, so that he now was committed to it?

And if he had actually arrived at that decision, then he must, also, have arrived at the other one. If he left the station, then he could no longer be in a position to appear before Galactic Central to plead that Earth be cured of war.

You are the representative of the Earth, Ulysses had told him. You are the only one who can represent the Earth.

But could he, in reality, represent the Earth? Was he any longer a true representative of the human race? He was a nineteenth century man; how could he represent the twentieth? How much, he wondered, does the human character change with each generation? And not only was he of the nineteenth century, but he had, as well, lived for almost a hundred years under a separate and a special circumstance, unlike any other human.

He knelt there, regarding himself with awe, and a little pity too, wondering what he was. Some strange sort of hybrid? A galactic halfbreed?

Slowly he pulled the lid down and pushed it tight. Then he shoved the trunk back underneath the shelves.

He tucked the box of letters underneath his arm and rose, picking up his rifle, and headed for the stairs.

XXI

HE FOUND some empty cartons stacked in the kitchen corner, boxes that Winslowe had used to bring out from town the

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supplies that he had ordered, and began to pack.

The journals, stacked neatly in order, filled one large box and a part of another. He took a stack of old newspapers and carefully wrapped the twelve diamond bottles off the mantle and packed them in another box, thickly padded, to guard against their breakage. Out of the cabinet he got the Vegan music box and wrapped it as carefully. He pulled out of another cabinet the alien literature that he had and piled it in the fourth box. He went through his desk, but there wasn't too much there, only odds and ends tucked here and there throughout the drawers. He found his chart and, crumpling it, threw it in the wastebasket that stood beside his desk.

The already filled boxes he carried across the room and stacked beside the door for easy reaching. When Lewis came with the body he would have a truck. If he had the important stuff all packed he could have it waiting.

The important stuff, he thought. Who could judge importance? It was all important; every item should be taken. And that might be possible. Given time and with no extra complications, it might be possible to haul it all away, all that was in this room and stored down in the basement. It all was his. He had a right to it, for it had been given him. But that did not mean that Galactic Central might not object most strenuously to his taking any of it.

And if that should happen, it was vital that he should be able to get away with those most important items.

He stood undecided, looking all about the room. There were all the items on the coffee table and those should be taken, too, including the little flashing pyramid of globes that Lucy had set to working.

He saw that the Pet once again had crawled off the table and fallen on the floor. He stooped and picked it up and held it in his hands. It had grown an extra knob or two since the last time he had looked at it. It was now a faint and delicate pink, whereas the last time he had noticed it had been a cobalt blue.

HE PROBABLY was wrong, he told himself, in calling it the Pet. It might not be alive. If it were, it was a sort of life he could not even guess at. It was not metallic and it was not stone, but very close to both. A file made no impression on it and he'd been tempted a time or two to whack it with a hammer to see what that might do, although he was willing to bet it would have no effect at all. It grew slowly, and it moved,

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but there was no way of knowing how it moved. But leave it and come back and it would have moved — a little. It knew when it was being watched and it would not move while watched. It did not eat so far as he could see and it seemed to have no wastes. It changed colors, but entirely without season and with no visible reason for the change.

A being from somewhere in the direction of Sagittarius had given it to him just a year or two ago. The creature had been something for the books. He probably wasn't actually a walking plant, but that was what he'd looked like — a rather spindly plant that had been shorted on good water and cheated on good soil, but which had sprouted a crop of dime store bangles that rang like a thousand silver bells when he made any sort of motion.

Enoch remembered that he had tried to ask the being what the gift might be, but the walking plant had simply clashed its bangles and filled the place with ringing sound and didn't try to answer.

So he had put the gift on one end of the desk and hours later, after the being was long gone, he found that it had moved to the other end of the desk. But it had seemed too crazy to think that a thing like that could move, so he finally convinced himself that he was mistaken as to where he'd put it. It was not until days later that he was able to convince himself it moved.

He'd have to take it when he left and Lucy's pyramid and the cube that showed you pictures of other worlds when you looked inside of it and a great deal of other stuff.

He stood with the Pet held in his hand and now, for the first time, he wondered at why he might be packing.

HE WAS acting as if he'd decided he would leave the station, as if he'd chosen Earth as against the galaxy. But when and how, he wondered, had he decided it? Decision should be based on weighing and on measuring and he had weighed and measured nothing. He had not posed the advantages and the disadvantages and tried to strike a balance. He had not thought it out. Somehow, somewhere, it had sneaked up on him — this decision which had seemed impossible, but now had been reached so easily.

Was it, he wondered, that he had absorbed, unconsciously, such an odd mixture of alien thought and ethics that he had evolved, unknown to himself, a new way in which to think? Perhaps some subconscious way of thought that had lain inoperative until now, when it had been needed.

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There was a box or two out in the shed. He'd go and get them and finish up the packing of what he'd pick out here. Then he'd go down into the basement and start lugging up the stuff that he had tagged. He glanced toward the window and realized, with some surprise, that he would have to hurry, for the sun was close to setting. It would be evening soon.

He remembered that he'd forgotten lunch, but he had no time to eat. He could get something later.

He turned to put the Pet back on the table and as he did a faint sound caught his ear and froze him where he stood.

It was the slight chuckle of a materializer operating. He could not mistake it. He had heard the sound too often to be wrong about it now.

And it must be, he knew, the official materializer, for no one could have traveled on the other without the sending of a message.

Ulysses, he thought. Ulysses coming back again. Or, perhaps some other member of Galactic Central. For if Ulysses had been coming, he would have sent a message.

He took a quick step forward so he could see the corner where the materializer stood and a dark and slender figure was stepping out from the target circle.

"Ulysses!" Enoch cried, but even as spoke he realized it was not Ulysses.

For an instant he had the impression of a top hat, of white tie and tails, of a jauntiness, and then he saw that the creature was a rat that walked erect, with sleek, dark fur covering its body and a sharp, axe-like rodent face. For an instant, as it turned its head toward him, he caught the red glitter of its eyes. Then it turned back toward the corner and he saw that its hand was lifted, was pulling out of a harnessed holster hung about its middle something that glinted with a metallic shimmer even in the shadow.

THERE WAS something very wrong about it. The creature should have greeted him. It should have said hello and come out to meet him. But instead it had thrown him that one red-eyed glance and then turned back to the corner.

The metallic object came out of the holster. It could only be a weapon.

And was this the way, thought Enoch, that they would close the station? One quick shot, without a word, and the station keeper dead upon the floor. With someone other than Ulysses, because Ulysses could not be trusted to kill a long-time friend, even for the galactic confraternity.

The rifle was lying across the

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desk top and there wasn't any time.

But the rat-like creature was not turning toward the room. It still was facing toward the corner and its hand was coming up, with the weapon glinting in it.

An alarm twanged within Enoch's brain. He swung his arm and yelled, hurling the Pet toward the creature in the corner, the yell jerked out of him, involuntarily; from the bottom of his lungs.

For the creature, he realized, had not been intent on the killing of the keeper, but the disruption of the station. The only thing there was to aim at in the corner was the control complex, the nerve center of the station's operation. If that should be knocked out, the station would be dead. To set it in operation once again it would be necessary to send a crew of technicians out in a spaceship from the nearest station — a trip that would require many years to make.

At Enoch's yell, the creature jerked around, dropping toward a crouch. The flying Pet, tumbling end for end, caught it in the belly and drove it back against the wall.

Enoch charged, arms outspread to grapple with the creature. The gun flew from the creature's hand and pinwheeled across the floor. Then Enoch was upon the alien and even as he closed with it, his nostrils were assailed by its body stench — a sickening wave of nastiness.

He wrapped his arms about it and heaved. It was not heavy. He jerked it from the corner and swung it around and sent it skidding out across the floor.

It crashed against a chair and came to a stop and then like a steel coil it rose off the floor and pounced for the gun.

Enoch took two great strides and had it by the neck, lifting it and shaking it so savagely that the recovered gun flew from its hand again. The bag it carried on a thong across its shoulder pounded like a vibrating triphammer against its hairy ribs.

The stench was so thick that one could almost see it; Enoch gagged on it as he shook the creature. And suddenly it was worse, much worse, like a fire raging in one's throat and a hammer in one's head. It was like a physical blow that hit one in the belly and shoved against the chest. Enoch let go his hold upon the creature and staggered back, doubled up and retching. He lifted his hands to his face and tried to push the stench away, to clear his nostrils and his mouth, to rub it from his eyes.

Through a haze he saw the creature rise and, snatching up the gun, rush toward the door. He

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did not hear the phrase that the creature spoke, but the door came open and the creature spurted forward and was gone. And the door slammed shut again.

XXII

ENOCH WOBBLED across the room to the desk and caught at it for support. The stench was diminishing and his head was clearing. He scarcely could believe that it all had happened.

It was incredible. The creature had traveled on the official materializer, and no one but a member of Galactic Central could travel by that route. And no member of Galactic Central, he was convinced, would have acted as the rat-like creature had. Likewise, the creature had known the phrase that would operate the door. No one but himself and Galactic Central would have known that phrase.

He reached out and picked up his rifle and hefted it in his fist.

It was all right, he thought. There was nothing harmed. Except that there was an alien loose upon the Earth and that was something that could not be allowed. The Earth was barred to aliens. As a planet which had not been recognized by the galactic confraternity, it was off limits.

He stood with the rifle in his hand and knew what he must do. He must get that alien back. He must get it off the Earth.

He strode toward the door and out around the corner of the house.

The alien was running across the field. It had almost reached the line of woods.

Enoch ran desperately, but before he was halfway down the field, the rat-like quarry had plunged into the woods and disappeared.

The woods were beginning to darken. The slanting rays of light from the setting sun still lighted the upper canopy of the foliage, but on the forest floor the shadows had begun to gather.

As he ran into the fringe of the woods, Enoch caught a glimpse of the creature angling down a small ravine and plunging up the other slope, racing through a heavy cover of ferns that reached almost to its middle.

If it kept on in that direction, Enoch told himself, it might work out all right. The slope beyond the ravine ended in a clump of rocks under a cliff. It might be a little rough to dig the alien from the rocks if it took refuge there, but it could not get away. Although he could waste no time. The sun was setting; it would soon be dark.

Running hard, Enoch crossed the area covered by the ferns and came out on the sharper slope

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some hundred yards below the boulders. Here the cover was not so dense, spotty underbrush and a scattering of trees. The soft loam of the forest floor gave way to a footing of shattered rock which through the years had been chipped off the boulders by the winter's frost, rolling down the slope. They lay there now, covered with thick moss, a treacherous place to walk.

THERE WAS no sign of the alien. Then, out of the corner of his vision, he saw motion and threw himself forward to the ground. Behind a patch of hazel brush he saw the alien outlined against the sky, its head pivoting back and forth to sweep the slope below, the weapon half lifted and set for instant use.

Enoch lay frozen, with his outstretched hand gripping the rifle. There was a slash of pain across one set of knuckles and he knew that he had skinned them on the rock as he had dived for cover.

The alien dropped from sight behind the boulders and Enoch slowly pulled the rifle back to where he would be able to handle it should a shot present itself.

Although, he wondered, would he dare to fire? Would he dare to kill an alien?

The alien could have killed him back there at the station, when he had been knocked silly by the dreadful stench. But it had not killed him; it had fled instead. Was the creature so badly frightened that all that it could think of had been to get away? Or had it been as reluctant to kill a station keeper as he was to kill an alien?

He searched the rocks above him. There was no motion and not a thing to see. He must move up that slope, and quick. Time would work to the advantage of the alien. Darkness could not be more than thirty minutes off and before dark had fallen this issue must be settled. If the alien got away, there'd be little chance to find it.

An alien could not be allowed upon the Earth. He shuddered as he imagined some of the complications which could arise from such a situation.

And why, asked a second self, standing to one side, should you worry about alien complications? For are you not prepared, yourself, to hand Earth as much alien lore and learning as may be within your power?

A rustle in the bushes to his left brought him around with the rifle up and ready.

And there was Lucy Fisher, not more than twenty feet away.

"GET OUT of here!" he shouted, forgetting that she could not hear him.

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But she did not seem to notice. She motioned to the left and made a sweeping motion with her hand, toward the boulders.

Go away, he said underneath his breath, and motioned her to go back.

She shook her head and sprang away, in a running crouch, moving further to the left and up the slope.

Enoch scrambled to his feet after her. And as he did the air behind him made a frying sound, and there was the sharp bite of ozone in the air.

He hit the ground instinctively. Farther down the slope a square yard of ground boiled and steamed.

A laser, Enoch thought. The alien's weapon was a laser, packing a terrific punch in a narrow beam of light.

He gathered himself together and made a short rush up the hillside, throwing himself prone behind a twisted birch clump.

The air made the frying sound again and there was an instant's blast of heat. Over on the reverse slope a patch of ground was steaming. Ash floated down and settled on Enoch's arms. He flashed a quick glance upward and saw that the top half of the birch clump was gone, sheared off by the laser and reduced to ash. Tiny coils of smoke rose lazily from the severed stumps.

No matter what it might have done or failed to do at the station, the alien now meant business. It knew that it was cornered.

Enoch huddled against the ground, worried about Lucy. He hoped she was safe. The little fool should have stayed out of it. This was no place for her. She'd have Old Hank out looking for her again, thinking she was kidnaped.

The dusk was deepening. Only the far peak of the treetops caught the last rays of the sun. A coolness came stealing up the ravine from the valley far below and there was a damp, lush smell from the ground. From some hidden hollow a whippoorwill called mournfully.

Enoch darted out from behind the birch clump and rushed up the slope. He reached the fallen log he'd picked as a barricade and threw himself behind it. There was no sign of the alien and there was not another shot from the laser-gun.

Enoch studied the ground ahead. Two more rushes, one to that small pile of rock and the next to the edge of the boulder area itself, and he'd be on top of the hiding alien. And once he got there, he wondered, what was he to do.

Perhaps, here in the open air, it could not use its stench defense as effectively as it had in the confines of the station. That might

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make it easier. He examined the clump of boulders from one edge to the other and there was nothing that might help him to locate the alien.

Slowly he began to snake around, getting ready for the next rush up the slope, moving carefully so that no sound would betray him.

Out of the tail of his eye he caught the moving shadow that came flowing up the slope. Swiftly he sat up, swinging the rifle. But before he could bring the muzzle round, the shadow was upon him, bearing him back, flat upon the ground, with one great splay-fingered hand clamped upon his mouth.

"ULYSSES!" ENOCH gurgled, but the fearsome shape only hissed at him in a warning sound.

Slowly the weight shifted off him and the hand slid from his mouth.

Ulysses gestured toward the boulder pile and Enoch nodded.

Ulysses crept closer and lowered his head toward Enoch's. He whispered, with his mouth inches from the Earthman's ear: "The Talisman! He has the Talisman!"

"The Talisman!" Enoch cried aloud, trying to strangle off the cry even as he made it, remembering that he should make no sound to let the watcher up above know where they might be in hiding.

From the ridge above a loose stone rattled as it was dislodged and began to roll, bouncing down the slope. Enoch hunkered closer to the ground behind the fallen log.

"Down!" he shouted to Ulysses. "Down! He has a gun."

But Ulysses' hand gripped him by the shoulder.

"Enoch!" he cried. "Enoch, look!"

Enoch jerked himself erect and atop the pile of rock, dark against the skyline, were two grappling figures.

"Lucy!" he shouted.

For one of them was Lucy and the other was the alien.

She sneaked up on him, he thought. The damn little fool, she sneaked up on him! While the alien had been distracted with watching the slope, she had slipped up close and then had tackled him. She had a club of some sort in her hand, an old dead branch, perhaps, and it was raised above her head, ready for a stroke, but the alien had a grip upon her arm and she could not strike.

"Shoot," said Ulysses, in a flat, dead voice.

Enoch raised the rifle and had trouble with the sights because of the deepening darkness. And they were so close together! They were too close together.

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"Shoot!" yelled Ulysses.

"I can't," sobbed Enoch. "It's too dark to shoot."

"You have to shoot," Ulysses said, his voice tense and hard. "You have to take the chance."

Enoch raised the rifle once again and the sights seemed clearer now and he knew the trouble was not so much the darkness as that shot which he had missed back there in the world of the honking thing that had strode its world on stilts. If he had missed then, he could as well miss now.

The bead came to rest upon the head of the rat-like creature, and then the head bobbed away, but was bobbing back again.

"Shoot!" Ulysses yelled.

Enoch squeezed the trigger and the rifle coughed. Up atop the rocks the creature stood for a second with only half a head and with tattered gouts of flesh flying briefly like dark insects, zooming against the half-light of the western sky.

ENOCH DROPPED the gun and sprawled upon the earth, clawing his fingers into the thin and mossy soil, sick with the thought of what could have happened, weak with the thankfulness that it had not happened, that the years on that fantastic rifle range had at last paid off.

How strange it is, he thought, how so many senseless things shape our destiny. For the rifle range had been a senseless. As senseless as a billiard table or a game of cards — designed for one thing only, to please the keeper of the station. And yet the hours he'd spent there had shaped toward this hour and end, to this single instant on this restricted slope of ground.

The sickness drained away into the earth beneath him. Peace came stealing in upon him — the peace of trees and woodland soil and the first faint hush of nightfall. As if the sky and stars and very space itself had leaned close above him and was whispering his essential oneness with them. And it seemed for a moment that he had grasped the edge of some great truth and with this truth had come a comfort and a greatness he'd never known before.

"Enoch," Ulysses whispered. "Enoch, my brother . . ."

There was something like a hidden sob in the alien's voice and he had never, until this moment, called the Earthman brother.

Enoch pulled himself to his knees and up on the pile of tumbled boulders was a soft and wondrous light, as if a giant firefly had turned on its lamp and had not turned it off, but had left it burning.

The light was moving down across the rocks toward them and he could see Lucy moving with

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the light, as if she were walking toward them with a lantern in her hand.

Ulysses' hand reached out of the darkness and closed hard on Enoch's arm.

"Do you see?" he asked.

"Yes, I see. What is . . ."

"It is the Talisman," Ulysses said, enraptured, his breath rasping in his throat. "And she is our new custodian. The one we've hunted through the years."

XXIII

YOU DID not become accustomed to it, Enoch told himself as they tramped up through the woods. There was not a moment you were not aware of it. It was something that you wanted to hug close against yourself and hold there forever. Even when it was gone from you, you'd not forget it, ever.

It was something that was past all description. A mother's love, a father's pride, the adoration of a sweetheart, the closeness of a comrade — it was all of these, and more. It made the farthest distance near and turned the complex simple. It swept away all fear and sorrow, for all of there being a certain feeling of deep sorrow in it, as if one might feel that never in his lifetime would he know an instant like this, and that in another instant he would lose it and never would be able to hunt it out again. But that was not the way it was, for this ascendant instant kept going on and on.

Lucy walked between them. She held the bag that contained the Talisman close against her breast, with her two arms clasped about it, and Enoch, looking at her, in the soft glow of its light, could not help but think of a little girl carrying her beloved pussy cat.

"Never for a century," said Ulysses, "perhaps for many centuries, perhaps never, has it glowed so well. I, myself, cannot remember when it was like this. It is wonderful, is it not?"

"Yes," said Enoch. "It is wonderful."

"Now we shall be one again," Ulysses said. "Now we shall feel again. Now we shall be a people instead of many people."

"But the creature that had it..."

"A clever one," Ulysses said. "He was holding it for ransom."

"It had been stolen, then."

"We do not know all the circumstances," Ulysses told him. "We will find out, of course."

They tramped on in silence through the woods and far in the east one could see, through the treetops, the first flush in the sky that foretold the rising moon.

"There is something," Enoch said.

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"Ask me anything you like," said Ulysses.

"How could that creature back there carry it and not feel — feel no part of it? For if he could have, he would not have stolen it."

"THERE IS only one in many billions," Ulyssts said, "who can — how do you say it? — tune in on it, perhaps. To you and me it would be nothing. It would not respond to us. We could hold it in our hands forever and nothing would happen. But let that one in many billions lay a finger on it and it becomes alive. There is a certain rapport, a sensitivity — I don't know how to say it — that forms a bridge between this strange machine and the cosmic spiritual force. It is not the machine itself, you understand, that reaches out and taps the spiritual force. It is the living creature's mind, aided by the mechanism, that brings the force to us."

A machine, a mechanism, no more than a tool — technological brother to the hoe, the wrench, the hammer — and yet as far a cry from these as the human brain was from that first amino acid which had come into being on this planet when the Earth was very young. One was tempted, Enoch thought, to say that this was as far as a tool could go, that it was the ultimate in the ingenuity possessed by any brain. But that would be a dangerous way of thinking. Perhaps there was no limit. There might quite likely be no such condition as the ultimate; there might be no time when any creature or any group of creatures could stop at any certain point and say this is as far as we can go, there is no use trying to go further. For each new development produced, as side effects, so many other possibilities, so many other roads to travel, that with each step one took down any given road there were more paths to follow. There'd never be an end, he thought — no end to anything.

They reached the edge of the field and headed up across it toward the station. From its upper edge came the sound of running feet.

"Enoch!" a voice shouted out of the darkness. "Enoch, is that you?"

Enoch recognized the voice.

"Yes, Winslowe. What is wrong?"

The mailman burst out of the darkness and stopped, panting with his running, at the edge of light.

"Enoch, they are coming! A couple of carloads of them. But I put a crimp in them. Where the road turns off into your lane — that narrow place, you know. I dumped two pounds of roofing nails along the ruts. That'll hold

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them for a while. But not for long, Enoch!"

"Roofing nails?" Ulysses asked.

"It's a mob," Enoch told him. "They are after me. The nails . . ."

"Oh, I see," Ulysses said. "The deflation of the tires."

Winslowe took a slow step closer, his gaze riveted on the glow of the shielded Talisman.

"That's Lucy Fisher, ain't it?"

"Of course it is," said Enoch.

"Her old man came roaring into town just a while ago and said she was gone again. Up until then everything had quieted down and it was all right. But old Hank, he got them stirred up again. So I went down to the hardware store and got them roofing nails and I beat them here."

"This mob?" Ulysses asked. "I don't . . ."

WINSLOWE interrupted him, gasping in his eagerness to to tell all his information. "That ginseng man is up there, waiting at the house for you. He has a panel truck."

"That," said Enoch, "would be Lewis with the Hazer's body."

"He is some upset," said Winslowe. "He said you were expecting him."

"Perhaps," suggested Ulysses, "we shouldn't just be standing here. It seems to my poor intellect that many things may be coming to a crisis."

"Say," the mailman yelled. "What is going on here? What is that thing Lucy has and who's this fellow with you?"

"Later," Enoch told him. "I'll tell you later. There's no time to tell you now."

"But, Enoch, there's the mob."

"I'll deal with them," said Enoch, grimly, "when I have to deal with them. Right now, there's something more important."

They ran up the slope, the four of them, dodging through the waist-high clumps of weeds. Ahead of them the station reared dark and angular against the evening sky.

"They're down there at the turn-off," Winslowe gasped, wheezing with his running. "That flash of light down the ridge. That was the headlights of a car."

They reached the edge of the yard and ran toward the house. The black bulk of the panel truck glimmered in the glow cast by the Talisman. A figure detached itself from the shadow of the truck and hurried out toward them.

"Is that you, Wallace?"

"Yes," said Enoch. "I'm sorry that I wasn't here."

"I was a bit upset," said Lewis, "when I didn't find you waiting."

"Something unforeseen," said Enoch. "Something that must be taken care of."

"The body of the honored one?"

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Ulysses asked. "It is in the truck?"

Lewis nodded. "I am happy that we can restore it. I'm sorry we caused a fuss."

"We'll have to carry him down to the orchard," Enoch said. "You can't get a car in there."

"The other time," Ulysses said, "you were the one who carried him."

Enoch nodded.

"My friend," the alien said, "I wonder if on this occasion I could be allowed the honor."

"Why, yes, of course," said Enoch. "He would like it that way."

And the words came to his tongue, but he choked them back, for it would not have done to say them — the words of thanks for lifting from him the necessity of complete recompense, for the gesture which released him from the utter letter of the law.

At his elbow, Winslowe said: "They are coming. I can hear them down the road."

He was right.

From down the road came the soft sound of footsteps padding in the dust, not hurrying, with no need to hurry, the insulting and deliberate treading of a monster so certain of its prey that it need not hurry.

Enoch swung around and half lifted his rifle, training it toward the padding that came out of the dark.

BEHIND HIM, Ulysses spoke softly: "Perhaps it would be most proper to bear him to the grave in the full glory and unshielded light of our restored Talisman."

"She can't hear you," Enoch said. "You must remember she is deaf. You will have to show her."

But even as he said it, a blaze leaped out that was blinding in its brightness.

With a strangled cry, Enoch half turned back to face the little group that stood beside the truck. The bag that had enclosed the Talisman lay at Lucy's feet. She held the glowing brightness high and proudly so that it spread its light across the yard and the ancient house, and some of it as well spilled out into the field.

There was a quietness. As if the entire world had caught its breath and stood attentive and in awe, waiting for a sound that did not come, that would never come, but would always be expected.

And with the quietness came an abiding sense of peace that seemed to seep into the very fiber of one's being. It was no synthetic thing — not as if someone had invoked a peace and peace then was allowed to exist by suffrance. It was a present and an actual peace, the peace of mind that came with the calmness of a sunset after a long, hot day, or the sparkling, ghost-like shimmer of

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a springtime dawn. You felt it inside of you and all about you and there was the feeling that it was not only here, but that the peace extended on and out in all directions, to the farthest reaches of infinity and that it had a depth which would enable it to endure until the final gasp of all eternity.

Slowly, remembering, Enoch turned back to face the field.

The men were there, at the edge of the light cast by the Talisman, a gray, huddled group, like a pack of chastened wolves that slunk at the faint periphery of a campfire's light.

And as he watched, they melted back — back into the deeper dark from which they had padded in the dust track of the road.

Except for one who turned and bolted, plunging down the hill in the darkness toward the woods, howling in maddened terror like a frightened dog.

"There goes Hank," said Winslowe. "That is Hank running down the hill."

"I am sorry that we frightened him," said Enoch soberly. "No man should be afraid of this."

"It is himself that he is frightened of," the mailman said. "He lives with a terror in him."

And that was true, thought Enoch. That was the way with Man; it had always been that way. He had carried terror with him. And the thing he was afraid of had always been himself.

XXIV

THE GRAVE was filled and mounded. The five of them stood for a moment more, listening to the restless wind that stirred in the moon-drenched apple orchard, while from far away, down in the hollows above the river valley, the whippoorwills talked back and forth through the silver night.

In the moonlight Enoch tried to read the graven line upon the rough-hewn tombstone, but there was not light enough. Although there was no need to read it; it was in his mind:

Here lies one from a distant star, but the soil is not alien to him, for in death he belongs to the universe.

When you wrote that, the Hazer diplomat had told him, just the night before, you wrote as one of us. And he had not said so, but the Vegan had been wrong. For it was not a Vegan sentiment alone; it was human, too.

The words were chiseled awkwardly and there was a mistake or two in spelling, for the Hazer language was not an easy one to master. The stone was softer than the marble or granite most commonly used for gravestones. The lettering would not last. In a few

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more years the weathering of sun and rain and frost would blur the characters. In some years after that they would be entirely gone, with no more than the roughness of the stone remaining to show that words had once been written there. But it did not matter, Enoch thought. The words were graven on more than stone alone.

He looked across the grave at Lucy. The Talisman was in its bag once more and the glow was softer. She still held it clasped tight against herself and her face was still exalted and unnoticing — as if she no longer lived in the present world, but had entered into some other place, some other far dimension where she dwelled alone and was forgetful of all past.

"Do you think," Ulysses asked, "that she will go with us? Do you think that we can have her? Will the Earth . . ."

"The Earth," said Enoch, "has not a thing to say. We Earth people are free agents. It is up to her."

"You think that she will go?"

"I think so," Enoch said. "I think this has been the moment she had sought for all her life."

For she always had been in touch with something outside of human ken. You sensed it, but you could not name it; and she had fumbled with it, trying to use it and not knowing how, charming off warts and healing poor hurt butterflies and only God knew what other acts that she performed unseen.

"Her parent?" Ulysses asked. "The howling one that ran away from us?"

"I'll handle him," said Lewis.

"You want her to go back with you to Galactic Central?" Enoch asked.

"If she will," Ulysses said. "Central must be told at once."

"And from there throughout the galaxy?"

"Yes," Ulysses said. "We need her very badly."

"Could we, I wonder, borrow her for a day or two."

"Borrow her?"

"Yes," said Enoch. "For we need her, too. We need her worst of all."

"Of course," Ulysses said. "But I don't . . ."

"Lewis," Enoch asked, "do you think our government — the secretary of state, perhaps — might be persuaded to appoint one Lucy Fisher as a member of our peace conference delegation?"

Lewis stammered, made a full stop, then began again: "I think it could possibly be managed."

"Can you imagine," Enoch asked, "the impact of this girl and the Talisman at the conference table?"

"I think I can," said Lewis. "But

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the secretary undoubtedly would want to talk with you before he arrived at his decision."

Enoch half turned toward Ulysses, but he did not need to phrase his question.

"By all means," Ulysses said to Lewis. "Let me know and I'll sit in on the meeting. And you might tell the good secretary, too, that it would not be a bad idea to begin the formation of a world committee."

"A world committee?"

"To arrange," Ulysses said, "for the Earth becoming one of us. We cannot accept a custodian, can we, from an outside planet?"

IN THE moonlight the tumbled boulder pile gleamed whitely, like the skeleton of some prehistoric beast. For here, near the edge of the cliff that towered above the river, the heavy trees thinned out and the rocky point stood open to the sky.

Enoch stood beside one of the massive boulders and gazed down at the huddled figure that lay among the rocks. Poor, tattered bungler, he thought, dead so far from home — and to so little purpose.

In that brain, now broken beyond recovery, must have lain a scheme of greatness — the kind of scheme that the brain of an earthly Alexander or Xerxes or Napoleon may have held, a dream of great power, cynically conceived, so grandiose that it canceled moral considerations.

He tried momentarily to imagine what the scheme might be, but knew how foolish it was to try.

It was ironic that the key of failure lay in the fact that the creature, in its fleeing, had carried the Talisman into the backyard of a sensitive, and on a planet, too, where no one would have thought to look for a sensitive. For there could be little doubt that Lucy had sensed the Talisman, drawn to it as truly as a magnet would attract a piece of steel. She had known nothing else, perhaps, than that the Talisman had been there and was something she must have, that it was something she had waited for in all her loneliness, without knowing what it was or without hope of finding it. Like a child who sees, quite suddenly, a shiny, glorious bauble on a Christmas tree and knows that it's the grandest thing on Earth and that it must be hers.

This creature lying here, thought Enoch, must have been able and resourceful. For it would have taken great ability and resourcefulness to have stolen the Talisman to start with, to keep it hidden for years, to have penetrated into the secrets and the files of Galactic Central. Would it have been possible, he won-

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dered, if the Talisman had been in effective operation? With an energetic Talisman would the moral laxity and the driving greed have been possible to motivate the deed?

But that was ended now. The Talisman had been restored and a new custodian had been found — a deaf-mute girl of Earth, the humblest of humans. And there would be peace on Earth and in time the Earth would join the confraternity of the galaxy.

THERE WERE no problems now, he thought. No decisions to be made. Lucy had taken the decisions from the hands of everyone.

The station would remain. He could unpack the boxes he had packed and put the journals back on the shelves again. He could go back to the station once again and settle down and carry on his work.

I am sorry, he told the huddled shape that lay among the boulders. *I am sorry that mine was the hand that had to do it to you.*

He turned away and walked out to where the cliff dropped straight down to the river flowing at its foot. He raised the rifle and held it for a moment motionless and then he threw it out and watched it fall, spinning end for end, the moonlight glinting off the barrel, saw the tiny splash it made as it struck the water. And far below, he heard the smug, contented gurgling of the water as it flowed past this cliff and went on to the ends of Earth.

There would be peace on Earth, but it was a long trail yet, a long and lonesome way.

Until no man ran howling, wild with fear (any kind of fear), would there be actual peace. Until the last man threw away his weapon (any sort of weapon), the tribe of Man could not be at peace. A rifle was the least of the weapons of the Earth, the least of man's inhumanity to man — and to others.

He stood on the rim of the cliff and looked out across the river and the dark shadow of the wooded valley. His hands felt strangely empty with the rifle gone, but it seemed that somewhere, back there just a way, he had stepped into another field of time, as if an age or day had dropped away and he had come into a place that was shining and brand new and unsullied by any past mistakes.

The river rolled below him and the river did not care. Nothing mattered to the river. It would take the tusk of mastodon, the skull of saber-tooth, the ribcage of a man, the dead and sunken tree, the thrown rock or rifle and would swallow each of them and cover them in mud or sand and

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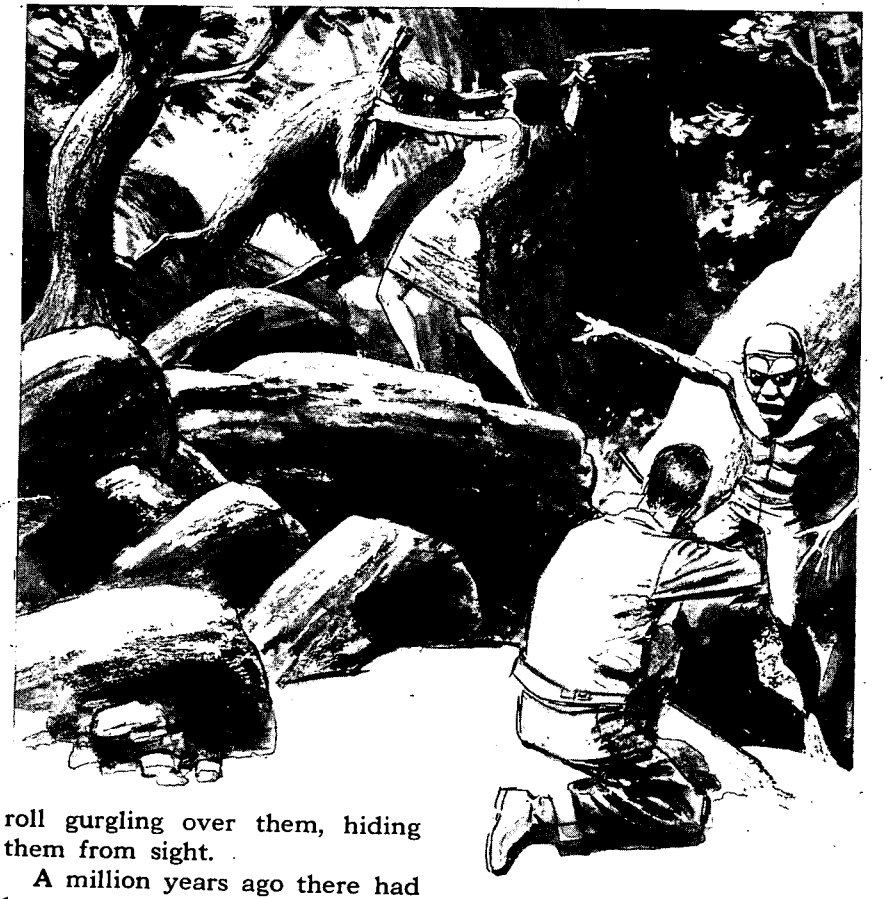

roll gurgling over them, hiding them from sight.

A million years ago there had been no river here and in a million years to come there might be no river — but in a million years from now there would be, if not Man, at least a caring thing. And that was the secret of the universe, Enoch told himself — a thing that went on caring.

He turned slowly from the cliff edge and clambered through the boulders, to go walking up the hill. He heard the tiny scurrying of small life rustling through the fallen leaves. Once there was the sleepy peeping of an awakened bird, and through the entire woods lay the peace and comfort of that glowing light. Not so intense, not so deep and bright and so wonderful as when it actually

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had been there, but a breath of it still left.

He came to the edge of the woods and climbed the field. Ahead of him the station stood foursquare upon its ridgetop. And it seemed that it was no longer a station only, but his home as well. Many years ago it had been a home and nothing more and then it had become a way station to the galaxy.

But now, although way station still, it was home again.

XXV

THE STATION was quiet and just a little ghostly. A lamp burned on his desk and over on the coffee table the little pyramid of spheres was flashing, throwing its many colored lights, like the crystal balls they'd used in the Roaring Twenties to turn a dance hall into a place of magic. The tiny flickering colors went flitting all about the room, like the dance of a zany band of Technicolor fireflies.

He stood for a moment, indecisive, not knowing what was missing. All at once he realized what it was. During all the years there'd been a rifle to hang upon its pegs or to lay across the desk. And now there was no rifle.

He'd have to settle down, he told himself, and get back to work. He'd have to unpack and put the stuff away. He'd have to get the journals written and catch up with his reading. There was a lot to do.

Ulysses and Lucy had left an hour or two before, bound for Galactic Central, but the feeling of the Talisman still seemed to linger in the room. Perhaps not in the room at all, but inside himself. Perhaps it was a feeling that he'd carry with him no matter where he went.

He walked slowly across the room and sat down on the sofa. In front of him the pyramid of spheres was splashing out its crystal shower of colors. He reached out a hand to pick it up, then drew it slowly back. What was the use, he asked himself, of examining it again? If he had not learned its secret the many times before, why should he expect to now?

A pretty thing, he thought, but useless.

He wondered how Lucy might be getting on and knew she was all right. She'd get along, he told himself, anywhere she went.

Instead of sitting here, he should be getting back to work. From now on Earth would be pounding at the door. There would be conferences and meetings and a lot of other things and in a few hours more the newspapers might be here. But before it happened, Ulysses would be

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back to help him, and perhaps there would be others, too.

In just a little while he'd rustle up some food and then he'd get to work. If he worked far into the night, he could get a good deal done.

Lonely nights were good for work. And it was lonely now.

HE ROSE and walked to the desk and picked up the statuette Winslowe had carved of him. He held it beneath the desk lamp and turned it slowly in his hands. There was loneliness in that figure, too — the essential loneliness of a man who walked alone.

But he'd had to walk alone. There'd been no other way.

He set the statuette back on the desk and remembered that he had not given Winslowe the piece of wood the Thuban traveler had brought. Now he could tell Winslowe where all the wood had come from. They could go through the journals and find the dates and the origin of every stick of it. That would please Old Winslowe.

He heard the silken rustle and swung swiftly round.

"Mary!" he cried.

She stood just at the edge of shadow. The flitting colors from the flashing pyramid made her seem like someone who had stepped from fairyland. And that was right, he was thinking wildly, for his lost fairyland was back.

"I had to come," she said. "You were lonely, Enoch, and I could not stay away."

She could not stay away. That might be true, he thought. For within the conditioning he'd set up there might have been the inescapable compulsion to come whenever she was needed.

It was a trap, he thought, from which neither could escape. There was no free will here, but instead the deadly precision of this blind mechanism he had shaped himself.

She should not come to see him and perhaps knew this as well as he, but could not help herself. Would this be the way that it would be, forever and forever?

He stood there, frozen, torn by the need of her and the emptiness of her unreality, and she was moving toward him.

She was close to him. In a moment she would stop, for she knew the rules as well as he; she, no more than he, could admit illusion.

But she did not stop. She came so close that he could smell the apple blossom fragrance of her. She put out a hand and laid it on his arm.

It was no shadow touch and it was no shadow hand. He could feel the pressure of her fingers and the coolness of them.

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He stood rigid, with her hand upon his arm.

The flashing light! he thought. The pyramid of spheres!

FOR NOW he remembered who had given it to him. It was one of those aberrant races of the Alphard system. And it had been from the literature of that system that he had learned the art of fairyland. They had tried to help him by giving him the pyramid and he had not under There had been a failure of communication, an easy thing to happen in the Babel of the galaxy.

For the pyramid of spheres was a wonderful and simple mechanism. It was the fixation agent that banished illusion. It made a fairyland real. You made something as you wanted it and then turned on the pyramid — and you had what you had made, as real as if it had never been illusion.

Except, he thought, in some things you couldn't fool yourself. You knew it was illusion, even if it should turn real.

He reached out toward her tentatively, but her hand dropped from his arm and she took a slow step backward.

In the terrible, lonely silence of the room they stood facing one another, while the colored lights ran like playing mice as the pyramid twirled its rainbow.

"I am sorry," Mary said. "It isn't any good. We can't fool ourselves."

He stood mute and shamed.

"I waited for it," she said. "I thought and dreamed about it."

"So did I," said Enoch. "I never thought it would happen."

And that was it, of course. So long as it could not happen, it was a thing to dream about, romantic and impossible. Perhaps it had been romantic only because it had been so far-off and impossible.

"As if a doll had come to life," she said, "or a beloved teddy bear. I am sorry, Enoch, but you could not love a doll or a teddy bear that had come to life. You always would remember them the way they were before. The doll with the silly, painted smile; the teddy bear with the stuffing coming out of it."

"No!" cried Enoch. "No!"

"Poor Enoch," she said. "It will be so bad for you. I wish that I could help. You'll have so long to live with it."

"But you!" he cried. "But you? What can you do now?"

It had been she, he thought, who had the courage that it took to face things as they were.

How, he wondered, had she sensed it? How could she have known?

"I shall go away," she said. "I shall not come back. Even when

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you need me, I shall not come back. There is no other way."

"But you can't go away! You are trapped the same as I."

She shook her head, moved swiftly and the pyramid of spheres was in her hand and lifted.

"No, not that!" he shouted. "No, Mary!"

The pyramid flashed, spinning in the air, and crashed against the fireplace.

The flashing lights went out. Something—glass? metal? stone? — tinkled on the floor.

"Mary!" Enoch cried, striding forward in the dark.

But there was no one there.

"Mary!" he whimpered.

She was gone and she would not be back. Even when he needed her, she would not be back.

He stood quietly in the dark and silence. The voice of a century of living seemed to speak to him. All things are hard, it said. Nothing is easy.

There had been the farm girl living down the road, and the southern beauty who had watched him pass her gate, and now there was Mary, gone forever from him.

He turned heavily in the room and moved forward, groping for the table. He found it and switched on the light.

He stood beside the table and looked about the room. In this corner where he stood there once had been a kitchen, and there, where the fireplace stood, the living room, and it all had changed — it had been changed for a long time now. But he still could see it as if it were only yesterday.

All the days were gone and all the people in them.

Only he was left.

He had lost his world. He had left it behind him.

But so, on this day, had all the other humans alive. They might not know it. But they, too, had left their world behind them.

"Good-by, Mary," he said. "Forgive me. God keep you."

He sat down at the table and pulled the journal that lay upon its top in front of him. He flipped it open, searching for the pages he must fill.

He had work to do, and now he was ready for it.

He had said his last good-by.

— CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

Jack Williamson & Frederik Pohl

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THE IMMENSE AND THE OUTRAGEOUS

NEXT to the unresolved question, "What is science fiction?", the most fascinating argument in the field is that concerning sf as literature, or, as some people prefer to call it, as Art. A great many of those who hold that the best of sf stands up with the best of any literature, seem to lose sight of the fact that it is perforce different from other fields. If it weren't there'd be no fen, no Cons, no Hugo. My own objections to the layman's attitude has come down to this: good sf out of the main stream, like *On the Beach* or *Fail Safe*, ought to be acknowledged as such. Likewise, good literature within our field ought to be recognized as such.

What brings out these cogitations just now is the appearance of two remarkable books, wildly different one from the other, and from most of anything you have ever read, yet both works of real stature.

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Harry Martinson is one of the Immortals of the Swedish Academy. In 1953 he published a short volume of "songs" called *Cicada*, a version of which formed the libretto for an opera performed at the Edinburgh Festival in '59 and at Covent Garden, London, in 1960. *Aniara* (Knopf, 133 pp., $4.00) contains the 29 "songs" of *Cicada* and a great many more, to total 103.

Aniara is the story of a spaceship loaded with four thousand immigrants from Earth to Mars. It encounters asteroids, is flung off course and damaged so that it can't be turned. The whole book, then, is an examination of bottled-up humanity in an absolutely inescapable predicament which can end only in death. We see them in the sixth, the ninth and the twentieth years, in episodes of fad and fashion, of religion, of love and fear.

I have read somewhere that Swedish is not a language that lends itself to literary excellence. Either this is not so, or the translators (Hugh Macdiarmid and Elspeth Harley Schubert) are people of unusual literary skill; for the language is simply beautiful. I nominate for anyone's high shelf of immortal lines-out-of-context (like, "Forever shalt thou love, and she be fair," and ". . . a rose-red city, half as old as Time,") this from *Aniara:*

She wounds, but as a rose may wound, not always, as expected, with its thorn. A rose will always wound you with its rose . . .

Martinson's achievement here is an inexpressible, immeasurable sadness. It is something that transcends panic and terror and even despair, which is after all a roiling and acidulous condition. He leaves you in the quiet immensities, with the feeling that you have spent time, and have been permanently tinted, by and with an impersonal, larger-than-God force which is inimical exactly to the extent that you are alive and have being.

I cannot and will not accept Martinson's profound disgust with humanity:

. . . describe the men who there in beauty stitched the white shrouds of their race until God and Satan hand in hand from a defiled and poisoned land past plains and mountains fled the face of man; the King of Ashes.

— preferring to regard this and other documents, (like *1984*, or Jean Genet's *The Balcony*) as terrifying and accurate projections of what might be, and therefore informative of how to change course actively and with purpose. Nevertheless I feel personally enriched and enlarged by this book, one which I shall surely always keep and read and ponder.

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ONE-TIME sf-ist Philip Wylie, who went on to hate middle-aged ladies for a living, called his greatest book, *Finnley Wren*, "a novel in a new manner." It's a nice concept, and a challenging one — to write a novel in a new manner.

I know a guy who has done it twice. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., whose *Sirens of Titan* is a perfect example of the piece of fine literature denied the general public by its Buck Rogers syndrome, has done it again with *Cat's Cradle* (Holt, 231 pp., $3.95). The 231 pages of this outrageous novel (on the dust jacket the word "novel" bears an asterisk for a footnote; the footnote reads "a harmless untruth") contain no less than 127 chapters. Some have such titles as *Communists, Nazis, Royalists, Parachutists and Draft Dodgers* and run all of nine short paragraphs; yet the author never deceives (not in this manner, anyhow) and you'll find the chapter does indeed deal with Communists, Nazis, etc., etc. Throughout the book are quotations from a skewed gospel called *The Books of Bokonon*, which may just possibly be Vonnegut's impertinent way of demanding who's to say whose gospels are skewed? "Live by the *foma*," says Bokonon, "that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy." *Foma* are harmless untruths.

The narrative on which the book's appalling, hilarious, shocking and infuriating events and characters are strung deals with a great scientist, now dead, the search for biographic material by a free-lance writer, his encounter with the scientist's past employers, acquaintances and fellow-townspeople, and his children: an angry midget, an ugly daughter who plays fabulous clarinet, and a moral degenerate who has become the weak power behind the meaningless throne of a tropical island called San Lorenzo. The writer goes to San Lorenzo spurred primarily by a Sunday supplement picture of the ward of the dictator, the most beautiful girl in the word. He finds himself affianced to her; and how would you feel if your beloved's idea of you-know-what was to take off your shoes, and you take off her shoes, and there you sit with the soles of your feet pressing together in ecstasy?

Along with these highest of jinks goes the grim specter of *Ice-nine*, a scientific development of horrendous proportions, about which I will say not one more word. I will and must say, however, that this is an annoying book, and you *must* read it.

And you better take it lightly, because if you don't you'll go off weeping and shoot yourself.

— **THEODORE STURGEON**

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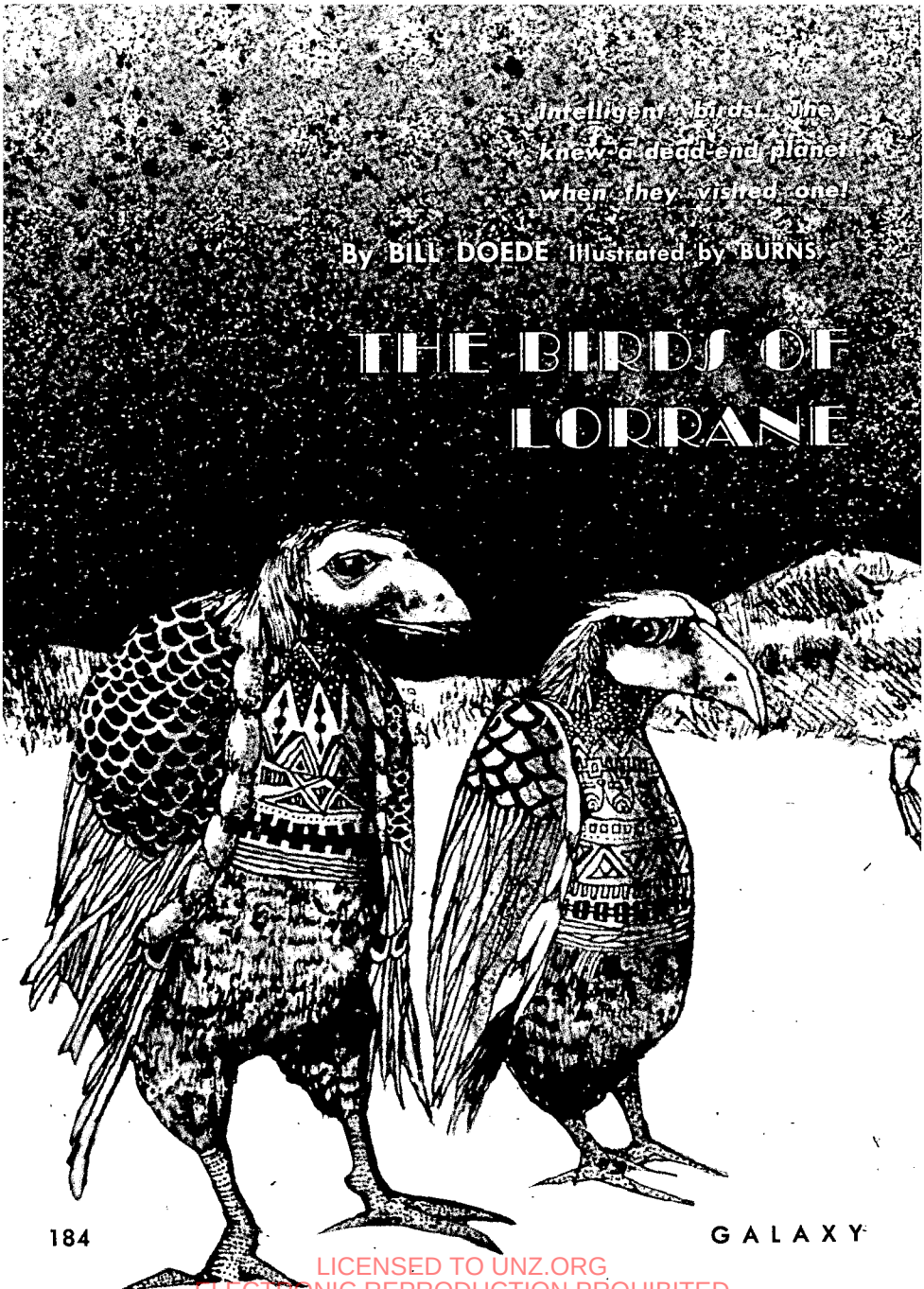
Intelligent birds! They knew a dead-end planet when they visited one!

By BILL DOEDE Illustrated by BURNS

THE BIRDS OF LORRANE



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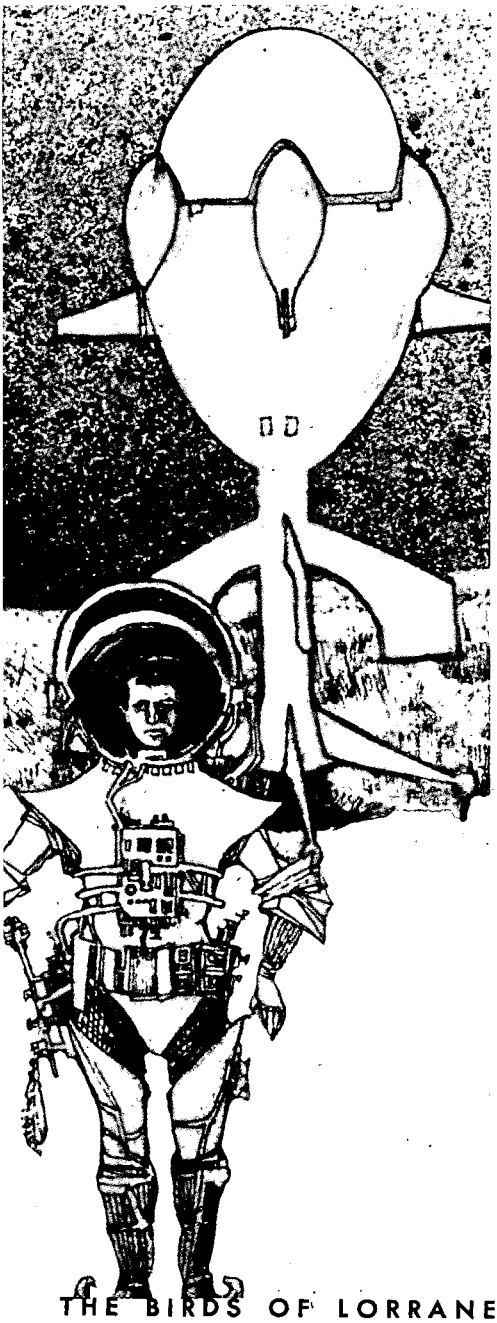

INGOMAR Bjorgson knew he was going to die.

He turned his back on his useless ship and went inside the bubble house that had been his home for ninety-nine days. Methodically he donned his all-weather clothes, his environment suit. He did not want to die in this place. Here was food and refrigeration for the days, warmth and comfort for the nights. He could not bring himself to put a gun to his head, or end it by any other direct, willful act. But out there in the desert, away from man-made helps for survival . . . there a man could get himself into circumstances where nature took care of it.

That was his reason for being here on this lonely planet, in the first place — the promise of finding intelligent life. For intelligence was rare in the universe, after all. A lone adventurer, a year before, forced down on this planet by a cosmic storm, had waited a week here for the storm to subside, then had landed on Earth with the feverish news of intelligent life. Ingomar Bjorgson had come to investigate.

Birds, yet.

THEY were only two. Two birds with minds like the edge of a razor, living alone on this planet that was one hundred per cent desert.

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He took one last look around the bubble, then walked out, leaving the door open. From ten feet away he watched the sand already blowing in through the doorway, and he felt very lonely and small. He knew that his death, like his life, would never be marked anywhere with any degree of permanence.

He walked. There was no hurry, so he walked slowly, stopping occasionally to turn and stare at the tracks his feet had scuffed in the sand, watching sand drift into them. He smiled wryly. The universe was so eager to be rid of him — as if he were a disease.

He looked up again, studying the whole sky. But there was no movement of wings, no silver streak of a ship coming to pick him up. Only one spot marred the desert's domain — the tiny bright reflection of the burning sun on the now distant bubble.

The birds had promised him. They had been so sure of themselves.

When he knew that the fierce sun and wind would kill him before he could get back to the bubble, he started removing his all-weather clothes. He flung them aside like a dancer. Coat to the left, trousers to the right. The hot wind threw the trousers back against his face. He tore them off with a curse. Shirt to the left. He kept the shoes on, out of respect for his feet. Then he trudged on, wondering vaguely how a half dressed man, dying on his feet, could make the same marks in the sand as a fully clothed, comfortable one.

He stumbled on an outcropping of rock. He fell. He picked himself up again. It would be quick, after all. The sun was in league with the rest of the universe. He would die soon.

He fell again.

He had found the planet of Lorrane easily. The adventurer's charts were accurate. It was a dry, barren place, an old, worn-out world where only wind and sand moved, where mountains shoved their eroded peaks into the impotent sky. But Ingomar found, upon emerging from his ship, that there was another movement. Two black dots appeared far away in the sky and rapidly grew larger. He had been told that the planet was populated by an intelligent form of bird life. Two were approaching now.

He smiled to himself. "Imagine that," he said to himself, "A smart bird. How should you meet a smart bird? Should you shake hands?"

The birds alighted in the sand before him. They eyed him with bright, intelligent eyes. They were quite large, standing at least two feet tall. Their gray

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feathers lay smooth and straight, immaculately cared for. Ingomar cast around in his mind for something to say, or some sign to make that indicated friendship.

Then one of the birds looked at the other and said, "This one is larger."

"Much," the other replied.

Ingomar was astonished. "You can talk?" he asked, "In English?"

"Certainly. Didn't the first man tell how he instructed us?"

"Yes, yes, of course," Ingomar said, confused. "But I didn't remem . . . that is . . . Well, I didn't believe it."

The birds eyed each other again. "I like him," one said. "If there's anything I hate, it's a completely honest person."

The other gave him a vicious peck on his back. "Shut up!" it said, "Do you want him to think we condone dishonesty?"

"Of course not," the other retorted hotly, "I just meant that, considering social protocol, it is sometimes kind to tell a very small lie."

INGOMAR was speechless. He looked back at his ship, standing tall and straight, ready to blast itself into the sky again. He glanced around at the lonely landscape. Finally he said, "It is difficult to see a difference between you two. Do you have names that I might be able to use?"

"Oh, yes. We beg your pardon. How uncivil of us. Our name, translated into your tongue, is Pisces."

"The fish?"

"Well," they said, "from our home planet the constellation does not look like a fish."

"Oh. Well, are both of you named Pisces? Oh, I see. That is your species. I am called Man; you are called Pisces."

"Of course not," they said, "You were right the first time. Pisces is our name. You can say, 'Pisces, get me that ship.' And we would do so."

"How can both of you have the same name? Are you actually one intelligence? And see that you keep your hands . . . I mean, see that you leave my ship alone."

One said, "We wouldn't think of touching your ship." The other said, "No, we are two separate entities."

Ingomar passed a hand over his face, thinking. The two very Earth-looking birds stood quietly before him, their feet buried in the sand so that it looked like their legs were two stilts shoved into the ground. At last he said, "Well, I know what we'll do. I will call you Pisces I," he pointed to the bird on his left, "and your companion Pisces II."

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The identical birds glanced at each other, then leapt into the air. They circled high above his head. They swooped low. They engaged in marvelous aerial gymnastics wonderful to see. Ingomar made notes in his book concerning their agility. Finally they came to rest before him again, so suddenly that he stepped backward quickly, frightened.

"Now," they said, "which one of us is Pisces I and which is Pisces II?"

Puzzled, Ingomar studied them carefully. The one with the quick temper might show this characteristic in some way. He pointed to the bird on his right. "You," he said, "are Pisces I".

They laughed. It was a verbal sound only. No expression showed in their eyes.

"ALL right," Ingomar said, after some thought. "I can fix that." He entered his ship and rummaged around in his clothes locker, then emerged with a brilliant red ribbon of plastic. "I'll tie this to your leg. That way I'll know that you are Pisces I. If you promise not to move it from one to the other."

"We promise."

He stooped over to tie the plastic on the leg of the one he thought was Pisces I, and was almost caught in the sudden flurry of slashing beaks and raking claws, like a mating fight in an aviary.

"*I* am Pisces I," one screamed, administering a resounding peck on the other's back.

"No, you're not. I am." This one leapt into the air and landed on the other's back. He raked vicious, long talons across the well-groomed feathers. "I am more intelligent than you. *I* should be Pisces I."

From a safe ten feet away, Ingomar threw the ribbon at them. "Stop it!" he yelled.

They obeyed instantly, and stood quietly side by side facing him. Ingomar drew his hand gun and pointed it at them. "Now stop your fighting, or I'll blow you to kingdom come."

"Fine," they said. "Anything to get off this miserable planet. How far is it?"

Ingomar smiled, in spite of his anger. "It's an expression. It means I will destroy you."

One of the birds quickly picked up the plastic ribbon and carried it to the other, and dropped it near the leg. Then both took it in their beaks and together they tied it around the leg. It was done so quickly that Ingomar stood there aghast, surprised into immobility. He had never before seen birds tie knots.

"It would not be wise to destroy us," Pisces I said. "We can help you."

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"How?"

"You need help," Pisces II said. "A storm is coming."

"A cosmic storm?" Ingomar asked. "I'm not worried about that. I'll stay here until it moves on."

Pisces I shook his head. "A planetary storm."

"When?"

"Sometime tonight."

"Okay," Ingomar said. "Thanks. I'll stay inside."

"It's not so easy as that. You must blast off and put your ship in orbit for the night."

"Why? Do you know how much fuel it takes to get into orbit? I have none to spare."

Pisces II scratched in the sand with his claws, thinking. Then he said, "Only one alternative exists. If you remain, the storm will wreck your ship. Take us aboard now, and blast off for your home planet. To stay here means death."

Ingomar snorted and turned back toward his ship. He thought, "Take them aboard my ship? Not in a million years." He saw their plan, now. They wanted to get into his ship. Then, by some means he could not now forsee, they would take the ship away from him.

HE WAS so shaken by this conclusion that he quickly retreated to safety, closing the airlock. The birds stayed outside. They were arguing between themselves. He could tell by the gesticulations they made with their heads. Once Pisces I attacked Pisces II viciously, raking him mercilessly with sharp talons. Pisces II fought back ferociously. They rolled over and over in the sand. Ingomar threw a switch that gave him communication outside the ship, and yelled at them.

They stopped fighting at once. He said, "Have you two lost your minds?"

Pisces II laughed. "Now how could one lose his mind? It goes with him everywhere."

"All right," Ingomar said. "I meant, have you become insane?"

"Of course not," Pisces I said. "We are peaceful entities. We intentionally developed this argument to break the monotony of life here."

"Is it so bad as that?"

"It is terrible. Will you take us aboard?"

Ingomar did not answer, but switched the communicator off and busied himself with recording his observations. He took advantage of their continued presence and took photographs.

Finally, after several hours, they leapt into the air and flew away toward the distant mountains. Ingomar was sorry to see

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them leave, and more than once checked his instruments for signs of a coming storm in case they were right. But nothing outside had changed.

After they had left he opened the ship and stepped outside, taking readings with instruments to record the character of the planet. He trudged through the eternally drifting sand, looking for some sign of life. No plants, insects, animals anywhere. Only the fine, mobile sand, occasionally an outcropping of rock not yet eroded away. And the heat! Ingomar was forced to turn the controls of his environment suit almost all the way up to keep comfortable. Then, when the sun receded behind the ghostly barren mountains, the cold came creeping in. Ingomar turned his controls in the other direction, while walking back to his ship. He was afraid he would not keep the cold outside.

The landscape, with the sun's absence, was dark and fearful. Shadows moved in the wind, shadows of drifting sand that took on the shapes of monsters lurking in the darkness. Ingomar was not one to frighten easily, but the night took on such ominous sighs and moans and movements that his imagination began to magnify them beyond recognition. When he finally saw the ship loom up before him he ran, stumbling toward it. He fumbled in the darkness for the control knob to open the lock and found it at last. He leapt inside, accompanied by a cold blast of wind and sand, and stood there panting, hearing his heart pound in his ears.

The night was long and lonely. He was too far from civilization for his radio equipment to bring the comfort of familiar sounds. He tried to read, but found concentration impossible. He thought of the birds, wondering where they were now, how they kept from freezing to death at night. He rewrote his notes, adding remembered facts and impressions. Finally he decided sleep was the most painless way of spending the night, and swallowed a small capsule designed to induce total sleep for at least six hours.

HE awoke the next morning standing on his head.

The bed, horizontal the night before, was now vertical. The whole room was vertical. Panic swept over him like a wave of burning fire. He scrambled to the airlock. It opened grotesquely.

The ship, which last night had stood so proudly, now lay on its side. And in his drugged sleep he had not known when it fell. For Ingomar, the bottom dropped out of everything, and his heart dropped with it. There was no resetting of a ship once it had

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fallen. This took special equipment. Ingomar Bjornson was a doomed man, and he knew it.

While he stood outside in the morning sun, staring at the horrible spectacle before him, the two birds alighted, one on each side.

"Why didn't you listen to us?" Pisces I said in an accusing tone.

"Yes," Pisces II echoed angrily. "You make me sick, thinking you're so smart, coming down here in your big ship and strutting around like you think you're a God, or something. Now, how big do you feel? Do you realize that this is our first opportunity to leave this planet? I've a good notion to peck your stupid eyes out right here and now."

"Leave him be," Pisces I said. "He may not be so bright, but I think he would have taken us with him, after he got used to us and saw how harmless we are."

Pisces II leapt at him, almost knocking Ingomar off his feet. "Shut up! I've a good notion to peck your eyes out, too."

"Oh, stop it!" Ingomar said wearily. "We're all doomed to spend the rest of our lives here. How was I to know that the storm would be so bad? My instruments gave no indication whatever."

"Actually, it was our fault," Pisces II said, more calmly. "We failed to mention the nature of the storm. We thought you knew. It was a magnetic storm. A shifting of magnetic currents surrounding the planet. We had no idea that you would think of the weather."

They walked with him around the fallen ship. It was not injured, that much Ingomar could see. The soft bed of sand had cushioned its fall. If it could only be righted! Ingomar knew it was impossible.

"It is pointed toward that knoll out there. See? Suppose we all got inside and blasted off. We would slide along and maybe when we reached the knoll we'd have enough speed to keep on going in a straight line until we could point her nose upward."

Ingomar shook his head, but he appreciated the suggestion. It indicated that they were willing to try anything. He knew their motives were not entirely philanthropic, but he liked them more for it, anyway.

He said, "There is only one way out, and that is for someone to come in and get us."

"Well," Pisces II said, "What are you waiting for? Call them."

"I can't. We are too far out for communication."

The two gray birds eyed one another in disbelief. Pisces I scratched his breast impolitely. Then he said, "Are you telling us that you have come this far from

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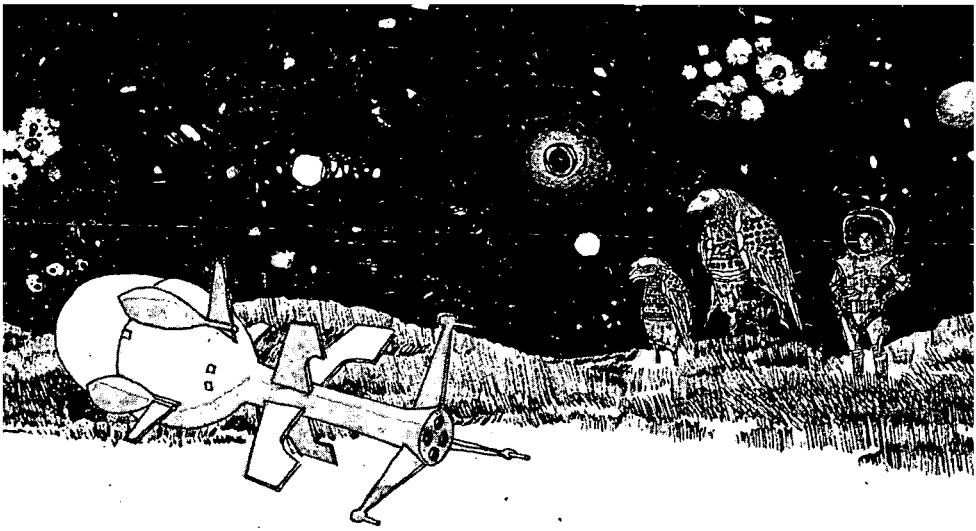

your own solar system, knowing that you could not call for help, if necessary?"

Ingomar nodded.

PISCES II snorted through his beak, and scratched in the sand. "Stupidity," he said. "There is no other word for it."

"Yes, there is," Pisces I answered, somewhat sharply. "In fact, there are several possible words. Bravery. Desperation. Actually I think it is a combination of both. I am sure that you are aware how rare intelligent life is in the universe. When you heard of us, you rushed out here at once. I would call it bravery to go beyond the sound of the voices of your kind. You are desperate because you are lonely in an almost empty universe."

"We must help him," said Pisces II.

"Of course. But first let's make him comfortable. It will be a long wait."

"Thank you," Ingomar said, moved by their sympathy. "But you cannot help. Or do you have a way to send messages?"

"Yes, in a way," Pisces II said, "You see . . ."

Pisces I lifted a huge wing and knocked Pisces II in the sand. He turned to Ingomar. "Do you promise to take us with you, if we should succeed in getting help?"

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Ingomar did not think it over. "Yes," he said.

"Then we will do it. But first we must make you comfortable. Do you have equipment for shelter, besides the ship?"

"Yes, there is the bubble. It can be expanded to become a house."

"Get it," Pisces II said.

Ingomar did. He dragged it outside and began to unfold it, in preparation for inflation. But Pisces II stopped him. "Not here," he said. "It will be a long time. Our calculation is that it will take at least forty-five days to get help. The trip from your planet alone is at least forty days. You will not wish to stare at your toppled ship for so long. I suggest we go beyond the first knoll."

Pisces I laughed and said to Ingomar, "For once he is using his brain. We will carry it."

He grasped the bubble in his claws, flapped his enormous wings and sailed off. Soon he returned, and among the three of them all his food and books and any equipment he might need was carried over the knoll out of sight of the wrecked ship.

"We will not return," they said, "until the rescue ship arrives. So make yourself comfortable. Do not stray too far from the ship. This is the most miserable planet in the universe. Give us plenty of time. We know we can summon help, but we do not know how long it will take. We may need as many as seventy-five days."

Ingomar settled down to wait.

THE fierce, burning sun had turned Ingomar's face and naked arms into fried areas of intense pain, but he regained consciousness when he felt the coolness of the ointment. It penetrated deep down, under the burned skin, into flesh and muscle, soothing injured cells.

He opened his eyes. He moved his head. The eyes were burned and bloodshot, but he could see a ship standing a hundred feet away. It was not sleek and long, pointing its needle nose at the sky, though. It was round, dull white, like a giant egg laid by a giant bird.

Bird? Ingomar chuckled, senses returning, thinking through his pain of Pisces I or Pisces II laying an egg. Then he laughed aloud.

He stopped, quite abruptly, and looked again. The egg was still there, but it was not an egg. It was actually a ship and the airlock was open and Pisces II was backing out, dragging a sort of stretcher on wheels.

"It's a . . . a . . . ship!" he exclaimed, tears running down his cheeks, over the ointment. "Whose ship is it?"

"Ours," said Pisces I.

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"Yours?" Ingomar said, after a long pause while the pain raged over his skin. He tried to sit up, and Pisces I got behind him and pushed, nudging him upright. "Where did you get it?"

"Oh," Pisces II interrupted. "We had it all the time."

"Shut up!" Pisces I yelled. "He asked me."

"Hold your tongue," Pisces II retorted hotly, "or I'll take off and leave you here. I've had enough of you in the past century to last a lifetime."

Pisces I said to Ingomar, "Pay no attention to that peasant." He helped Pisces II push the stretcher next to Ingomar. Then he pushed a lever and the stretcher reduced itself to ground height. It was too short for Ingomar's body, having been designed for the body of a bird. "He's right, though," Pisces I continued, giving the stretcher a kick because it wasn't long enough. "We had the ship all along. It was despicable of us to deceive you, but our ship was defective, and we needed yours for parts."

Ingomar shook his head. "There was no magnetic storm?"

Pisces II nodded his head. "Oh, yes, there was a storm. But not a natural phenomenon, I'm sorry to say. Too bad. The natural storms are much more beautiful."

"And you had the bubble set up away from the ship so I wouldn't see you steal the parts?"

They hung their heads. "Despicable," they said. "A rotten thing to do."

Ingomar was too ill for anger. "Let me understand this," he said. "You ruined my ship to get parts for yours. Why? Why not just take my ship?"

"Too slow," Pisces II said. He took the container of ointment in his beak and set it beside Ingomar's hand. "Here, you can rub it on by yourself now. Get busy."

Pisces I said, By your standards our planet is a terrible distance away. Your ship would take too long. Hurry, now. We've got to take you to . . . what do you call it, Earth? What an odd name! We're in sort of a hurry to get home, as you might imagine."

Ingomar hurried. With the help of the mysterious, healing ointment he was soon able to get up and make his way to the ship.

"One more question," he said. "Your ship was defective and you set down here and you've been here for a long time, and you're a long way from home. What were you doing so far from home, in the first place?"

"What do you suppose?" said Pisces I irritably. "We were looking for intelligent life. Get a move on, now. If we don't waste too much time on this Earth, we may still find some!"

— BILL DOEDE

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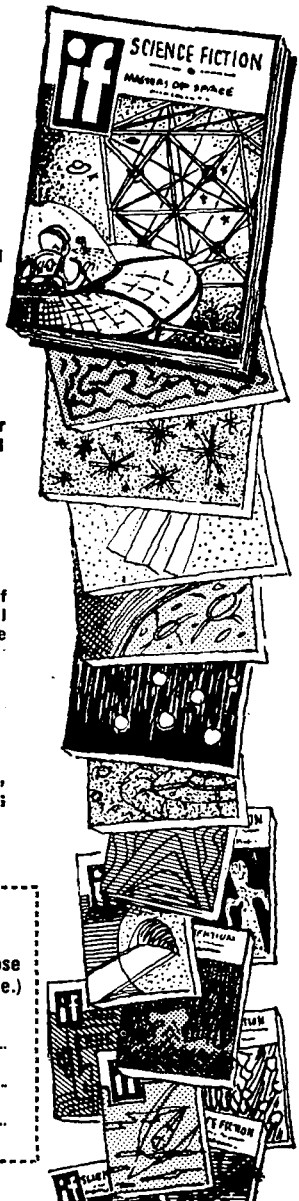

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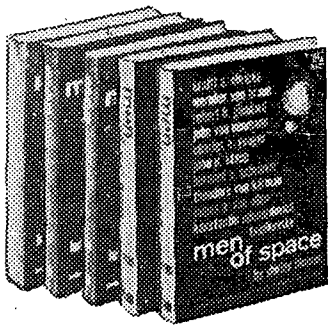

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